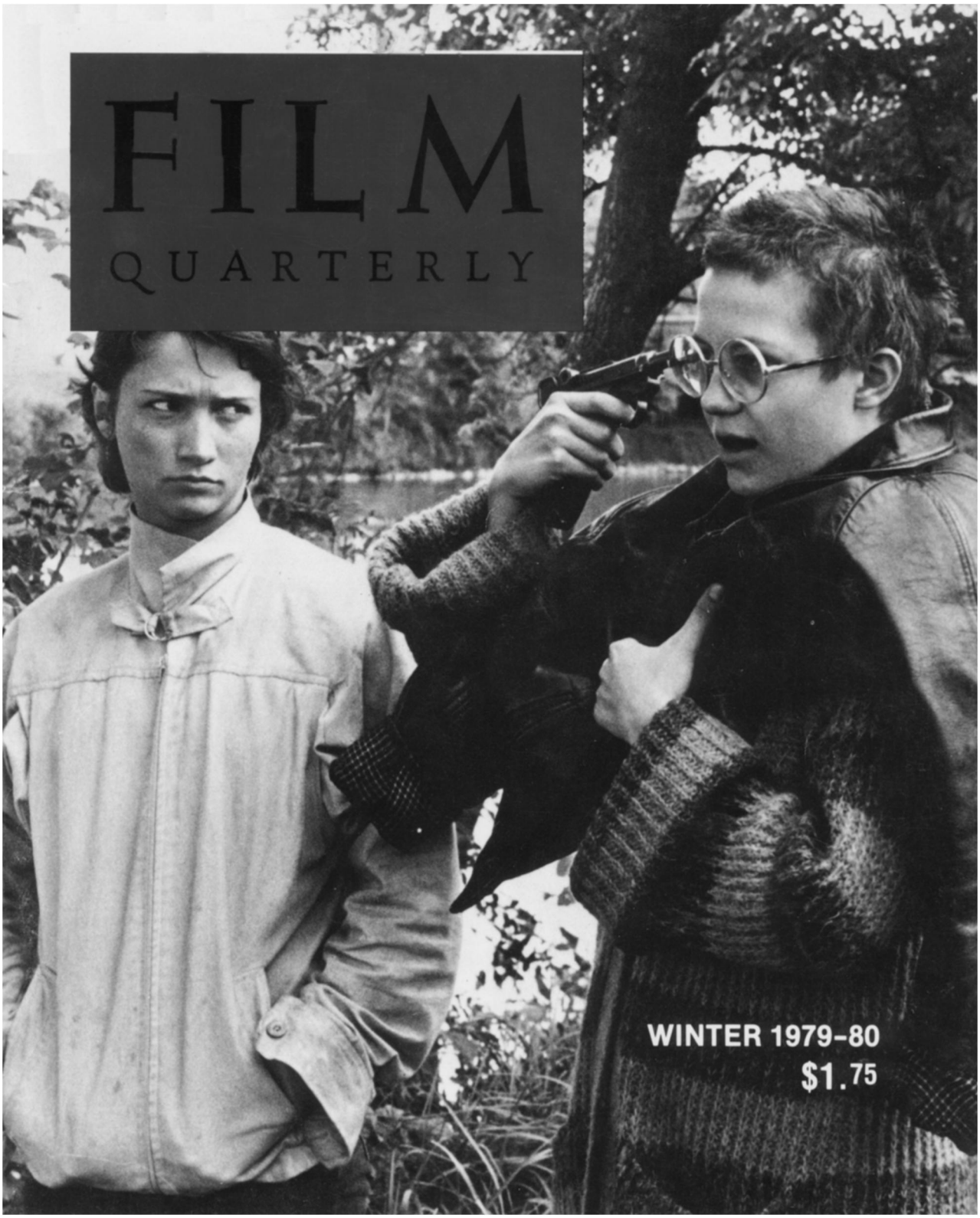
FILM QUARTERLY



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LEE R. BOBKER,

President and Executive Producer,
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In the Third Edition of this balanced and beautifully illustrated introduction to the study of film, Lee R. Bobker reveals an extraordinary perception of contemporary filmmaking. His firsthand experience as a writer, producer, and director enables him to discuss the technical and aesthetic elements of film with intimacy, insight, and an enthusiasm that will prove infectious both to the serious student of filmmaking and to the general reader who wishes to learn more about the art form.

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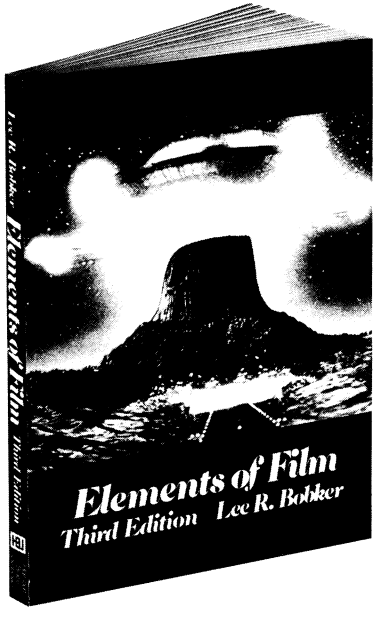

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■ **New and enlarged selection of color pages.** Most of the stills on the eight color pages (twice the number of color pages as in the previous edition) are new. They feature the work of outstanding contemporary cinematographers such as Sven Nykvist, Vilmos Zsigmond, Haskell Wexler, John Alonzo, and Gordon Willis.

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Editor's Notebook

CONTRIBUTORS

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DON WILLIS

Fritz Lang: Only Melodrama

The publication of a clutch of books in the past few years on the late, Austrian-born director Fritz Lang seems a likely occasion for reassessing and revaluating his long career in Germany and America. It has now been ten years since the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's first major Lang retrospective, and his achievement is beginning to seem less formidable than it did then.

After reading *Fritz Lang* by Lotte H. Eisner (Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Fritz Lang* by Robert A. Armour (G. K. Hall, 1978), one might conclude that there is just not much to be said about his work. At least Armour and Eisner have little to contribute to an understanding of it. Lotte Eisner admits in her preface that her close friendship with Lang made writing difficult and may have clouded her objectivity; and her writing in *Fritz Lang* is indeed generally vapid and naive, and often defensive. Eisner on a scene in Lang's *Cloak and Dagger:* "This, however, is no sentimental boy-meets-girl situation." On Lang's *While the City Sleeps:* "It is myopic to see this film—as at least one German critic did—as no more than a 'thriller'." Eisner's book is primarily synopses of films punctuated by stray, timid analytical interjections ("No detail is wasted in Lang"), as if she were afraid of intruding on the master at work. When she does venture an idea of her own, the

PHOTO ABOVE: *Gloria Graham in* THE BIG HEAT

results are as often as not unfortunate: "What [Lang] wanted to say was that the ultimate reason for the murders [in *M*] is the unequal distribution of wealth. Frau Beckmann is forever at the tub; hence she has no time to look after Elsie properly, or to fetch her from school." A handy word, "myopic."

Armour's *Fritz Lang* centers on the theme of "the dark struggle" (i.e., "man's psychological fears"), and to give the book the appearance of unity and coherence, he uses the word "struggle" 600 times, mechanically injecting it into every section and almost every paragraph: "[The killer's] struggle [in *While the City Sleeps*] is with the police and the reporters who are trying to chase him down. This is a curious struggle, unlike any other Lang created on the screen. This is both a struggle and a surrender." Armour's struggle is with the English language: "Those characters of [Lang's] that survive and emerge from [the dark struggle] without surrendering to it are those in whom there is enough decency to keep them out of the pits of degeneracy." Armour's conclusion, after 150 pages: "The dark struggle is a worthy theme, a theme that gives meaning to the visual images that dominate the films of Fritz Lang."

If there is a correlation between the quality of the artist's work and the quality of the criticism inspired by that work, Lang may be in trouble. Commenting on the scene in Lang's *You Only Live Once* in which Joan (Sylvia Sidney) suggests to Eddie (Henry Fonda) that the frogs in the pond at their honeymoon inn may "see something in each other that no one else can see," George Wilson concludes that "it is clear that what the frogs see in Joan and Eddie is not to be known." Lang may indeed be in trouble. And perhaps that's as it should be. Was he indeed no more than a director of "thrillers"? Why do critics defending Lang usually sound like they're apologizing for him? Jonathan Rosenbaum: "Critics hung up on 'craft' and intentionality will probably never be able to see [*The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Hindu Tomb*, Lang, 1959] as a dazzling achievement. . . ." Andrew Sarris: "[Lang] has always lacked the arid sophistication lesser directors display to such advantage." By implication, Lang's career was distinguished by a fertile crudity, sloppy craftsmanship, and lack of artistic control.

The earliest examples we have of Lang's work, *The Golden Sea* and *The Diamond Ship*—completed parts one and two of a projected four-part "series" called *The Spiders* (1919)—are in some ways representative of much of that work. Serial-like, they feature the most rudimentary of "thrills"—actors menaced by rooms filling up with water or the walls of a room coming together—and have, to put it mildly, no character, story, or thematic interest. Pre-art, they qualify at best as slow, dull camp. The second part is perhaps even more slowly paced than the first, and duller, or just longer (about 80 minutes long, compared to 50 for the extant version of *The Golden Sea*). "Action," in both parts, usually means that (a) something is about to happen, and (b) something has happened, but (c) thanks to the awkward staging and editing you can't quite be sure what or how.

Lang's *Destiny* (1921), a three-story film with a linking narrative, has some stunning sets and effects, but the first two stories are dramatically nil. The third story, an Oriental fantasy-comedy, is slight but amusing, and the framing story, in which Death comes between two lovers, has occasional force. As with other silent German Langs like *Siegfried*—the first part of *Die Nibelungen* (1924)—*Metropolis* (1926), *Spies* (1928), and *Woman in the Moon* (1928), the pictorial overwhelms the dramatic. The above-cited films tend to make better stills than films. And accordingly, the most impressive of the new books on Lang is Frederick W. Ott's *The Films of Fritz Lang* (Citadel, 1979), a treasure-trove of photographs ransacked from the film archives of the world. (The most nearly satisfactory *critical* work on Lang in English is still Paul Jensen's *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*.) Ott's extensive coverage of Lang's German spectaculars like *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis* will leave you drooling, though Lang's American films are more cursorily and less impressively illustrated.

One begins looking for "composition" in a film like *Spies* because there's nothing else to look for. And one finds it: Lang's choreography of Rudolf Klein-Rogge's movements as masterspy Haghi is most striking. But Klein-Rogge is the only really distinctive feature of a thriller which features not

one but two tired Mata Hari plots, and lots of predictable last-minute escapes.

Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler (two parts, 1922) was subtitled "A Portrait of Our Time," and Lang himself called it "a document of its time." But as film historian Barry Salt has pointed out in *Sight and Sound, Dr. Mabuse* is really "no more than a vastly expanded version of the Danish and French master criminal thrillers which flooded the German market in pre-war days. . . . Lang's film is not even much of an improvement in craftsmanship, despite the several years of development there had been in film technique elsewhere." Reviews of the film in Germany at the time of its release exulted: "No vice of our time is forgotten. . . . It is a mirror of the age. . . . Not one important symptom of the post-war years is missing. Stock exchange manoeuvres, occultist charlatanism, prostitution and over-eating, smuggling, hypnosis and counterfeiting, expressionism, violence and murder!" This "portrait" sounds more like a sensationalistic checklist, and anyone new to the film has to be surprised to find—behind all the sociological sensationalism—a standard cops-and-robbers yarn.

Much more intriguing than the film itself is the critics' insistence on its "importance," on its sociological acuteness. If *Dr. Mabuse* were more successful as "(no more than) a thriller," would Lang and the reviewers still feel the need to inflate its importance? Lang's follow-up *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1932) is far more exciting than the original—an exception to the rule of inferior sequels, and probably the best of Lang's serial-like thrillers—and the press on it is, accordingly, less shrill and defensive. *Testament* doesn't need outside help—as his last, feeble entry in the series, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960), does. The performances in the first *Mabuse* range from the broad, "silent movie" type to the relatively inconspicuous, and even Mabuse himself (played by Klein-Rogge) is a standard supercriminal role, not far removed from that of the dreaded Lio-Sha of *The Spiders*. As a melancholic evocation of a "decadent," suicide-shadowed closed society, a film like Val Lewton's *The Seventh Victim* (1943) is much more successful than *Dr. Mabuse,* and no one has had to resort to quoting news stories about devil worship in the Greenwich Village of the time to justify the existence of the former.

Metropolis, like *Dr. Mabuse*, announces its own importance: "The heart must mediate between the brain that plans and the hands that build." The film has been much criticized for this simplistic social formula, and deservedly so. Good advice or not, it's still advice, and art is easier to take when it works more indirectly, more insidiously. *Metropolis*, however, does more than give advice—it also conjures up a succession of true scenic wonders: the robot Maria's creation scene; the vision of the machinery as Moloch; the visualization of Death and the 7 Deadly Sins; the Tower of Babel sequence; Rotwang's light impaling the true Maria. Lang and writer Thea von Harbou did possess a sense of spectable. Unfortunately, in *Metropolis*—as in other Lang films—the spectacle seems almost incidental.* The stilted "frog" dialogue in *You Only Live Once*, for instance, is punctuated by a shot of one frog jumping into the pond, the waves from the splash obliterating the reflection of Joan and Eddie on the water. But the eerie delicateness of this image of foreboding is betrayed by the crudeness of development of plot and character, as, in *Metropolis*, the spectacle seems sacrificed to the message.

The plot of *Metropolis* can be summarized: the hero Freder always turns up in the right place at the right time. He's there when the heroine Maria brings her flock of children up from the underground world of the workers; there when one worker, exhausted, faints in his arms; there when another worker, exhausted, falls from the machinery, apparently to his death; there when

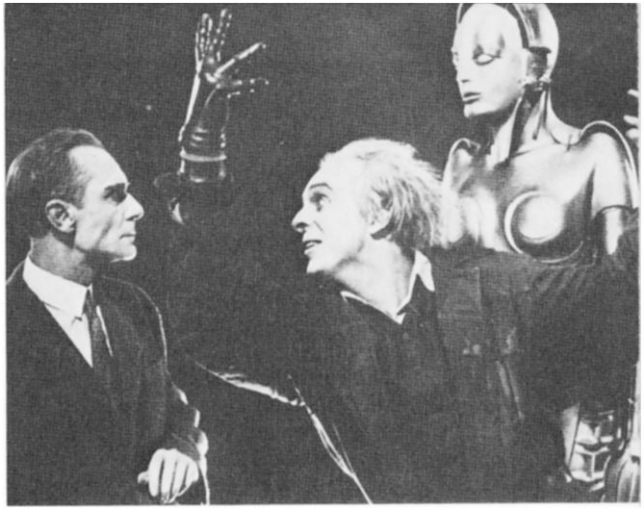
*It should be noted that the standard version of *Metropolis* might more accurately be called *Highlights from Metropolis*. The film was cut from 17 reels to 10 reels for its initial (1927) American release and—until very recently—was available (at least in this country) only in this truncated form. Lang called the result a "mutilated surrogate," and Paul Jensen contends that the "elimination of many scenes and the rewriting of some titles have excessively confused certain motivations and characters." But help is—finally—on the way: the Munich Film Museum has been restoring and reconstructing German film classics, including other Langs like *M* and *Die Nibelungen*—one lost hour of *Kriemhild's Revenge*, for instance, was found and restored—and according to Tom Luddy of Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive, the Museum has also at least partially succeeded in reconstructing the original, full-length *Metropolis*.

Maria, kidnapped by Rotwang, screams for help, etc. Structurally, *Metropolis* is not just crude. It's downright brazen in its crudeness. You begin to wonder if this incredible series of narrative coincidences might not be part of some arcane aesthetic tactic. But it finally seems closer to simple didacticism than to aesthetics—*Metropolis*, or A Portrait of Freder's Consciousness Rising in His Time.

Metropolis, with its mixture of spectacle and camp, is a gigantic, grotesque curiosity. It contains several hilarious ideas of acting, including Brigitte Helm's impaled-on-light expressions as Maria and Gustave Fröhlich's prolonged, agonized enlightenment. And Helm's robot Maria is certainly amusing too. The question is, was she *supposed* to be amusing as Lang's slinky, mechanical embodiment of evil? Is his idea of evil here just plain silly, or is he making fun of the notion of pure evil? Freder and Maria are simply bad ideas, but that robot is not quite as easily dismissed from the mind.

Lotte Eisner calls it "fate" or "chance" or "destiny." Sarris and others call it "the trap." Gavin Lambert likes to call it "fatality." And David Thomson arrives—through some metaphysical contortions—at "the fatalness of melodramatic certainty." But what they all seem to be talking about—in reference to Lang's American films—is simply plot. In *You Only Live Once* (1937), narrative coincidences like Eddie's breaking out of prison just as his pardon arrives, or the auto court man's spotting the fugitive, Joan, at the cigarette machine, can (as in *Metropolis*) be more readily ascribed to facile plotting than to the workings of Fate. Lambert euphemizes these coincidences as "a series of deliberate ironic coincidences." And it's true—you're *supposed* to be aware of the coincidences in the plot of *You Only Live Once*—danger! they cry, the irony of Fate at work—whereas in *Metropolis*, where they're just means to a didactic end, you're supposed to ignore them. But what it comes down to is the difference between trying to hide the mess one has made (*Metropolis*) and calling attention to it (*You Only Live Once*).

In Lang's *Woman in the Window* (1944), it's



METROPOLIS: *Rotwang and the robot Maria*

the *plot* that stipulates that Raymond Massey is both the DA *and* amateur killer Edward G. Robinson's friend, the plot that stipulates that there is a cab outside the apartment building as Robinson and Joan Bennett are about to spirit out the body of her boy friend, etc. Lang's vaunted "determinism" begins to look more like tired writing or heavy-handed irony—a mechanical "Well, wouldn't you know it?" as the "last thing you'd expect to happen" invariably does happen in his American films: near the conclusion of *Woman in the Window*, Robinson poisons himself . . . *just as* the blackmailer (Dan Duryea) is shot to death —i.e., just as *Robinson's* pardon arrives. Sentimental optimism: the pardon arrives in the nick of time. Sentimental pessimism: the pardon arrives a moment too late. Lang's American films are sentimentally ironic situation dramas.

Even Lambert worries that the events in *You Only Live Once* might "sound unacceptably fabricated." But then he adds, "Yet it is this arbitrariness that gives to the film its curious and memorable force." How does one get from "fabricated" to "arbitrariness" to "force"? Answer: "Lang brings it off by keeping rigidly to his schematic conception." The key words here are "rigidly" and "schematic," and, like "fabricated" and "arbitrariness," they are Lambert's, and I will be glad to let them stand.

Lang's conception of Fate in his American films might best be described as Sternberg without wit. *You Only Live Once* and *Woman in the Window* are, in significant ways, near-opposites of a film

like *The Blue Angel* (1930), in which the hero Professor Rath becomes tragicomically enmeshed in the gears of a mechanism which *he* set in motion. The Sternberg picture—stingingly comic—has none of the phony somberness of *You Only Live Once*, whose fugitives are "innocents" abroad in a mean, nasty world which is (carefully) peopled with insensitive, uncaring employers and officials. The tone of the Lang film is whining, self-pitying. Poor little Eddie and Joan can't escape "the stain of the world," to quote one character. The script constitutes a too-easy absolution of individual responsibility. Glumly, it proposes that it's *others* who set the gears in motion.

Sternberg might have turned that script into a high comedy about two people with a shared persecution complex—justified by circumstances or not—into something, that is, like *The Devil is a Woman* (1935), in which Marlene Dietrich is Lionel Atwill's own personal, perverse Fate. The world of *Devil is a Woman* is colored by the comic complementariness of Dietrich and Atwill, but Lang finds nothing funny about the situation of Joan and Eddie in *You Only Live Once.* He intends his film to be a condemnation of a corrupt society which corrupts the individual, though it's actually closer to a ringing indictment of insensitivity. The script's alternate, equally simplistic theses are that Eddie was "born bad" (as two characters at two different points in the film suggest) or that society made him bad. But society, not Eddie, is obviously the scapegoat, and the film is only after scapegoats. (Lambert: *"You Only Live Once* and *You and Me* [Lang, 1938] are . . . dramatic abstracts of society's indifference to the outcast. . . .") A few more "sensitive" and "caring" people in key positions in the world of *You Only Live Once*, and Joan and Eddie and the frogs would have lived happily ever after (on Earth).

In *Woman in the Window*, Robinson's encounters with Joan Bennett and other pulp characters turn out to be a dream. *No* mechanism is set in motion. It's as if Lang and scriptwriter-producer Nunnally Johnson had seen *The Blue Angel* and taken it as a cautionary fable. Their film is a call to unadventurousness. It opposes a sketchily drawn "everyday reality" to conventional, pulp-crime-drama "excitement" (i.e., Robinson's dream) and finds that dullness is best: leave adventure to Fritz Lang movies. *Woman in the Window* posits an average man to whom—ideally—nothing happens. It's like a seriously wrong-headed reading of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle."[2]

The world of *Woman in the Window* and *You Only Live Once* is a sparsely populated one. "Fate," in the form of over-clever plotting, is virtually the only inhabitant. Thomson asks us to "look past the melodrama and simplicity of Lang's films," but if we do we'll probably only discover that there's nothing there. What may, for instance, at first appear to be a nuance of characterization in *Woman in the Window*—say, Bennett's initial mistrust of Robinson—is invariably revealed to be merely a kink in the plot—Bennett's lack of trust leads her into keeping his coat, which contains a piece of evidence incriminating him. Of course since this ingenious plotting is also Robinson's dream these kinks in the plot can also be seen as kinks in his psyche: characterization in *Woman in the Window* is purely retrospective.

Scarlet Street (1945), the Robinson-Bennett-Duryea companion film to *Woman in the Window*, is plot-constricted too, but it's a solidly constructed melodrama—one of Lang's few good American films. It lacks the social and philosophical dimensions of the original film version, Jean Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931), as Edward G. Robinson's Chris Cross lacks the sly wit and traces of self-contempt of Michel Simon's Legrand: the diminished interest of the role may be due as much to Robinson's rather monotonous playing as it is to the writing. But *Scarlet Street* has Dan Duryea ("For cat's sake!") and Joan Bennett ("Jeepers!") as the pair who take advantage of Robinson's passion for her. (Bennett was also good in Lang's 1941 *Man Hunt.*) Their Johnny and Kitty are two of the very few characters in Lang's American films to have a life apart from the demands of a plot. His hearty low humor and lusty self-appreciation, and her languorousness—she *oozes* in and out of beds, sofas and his arms—provide a type of human spectacle which Lang usually had no time to appreciate in his films. Their pet exclamations, as quoted above, are emblematic of

their absolute willfulness, their impatience with objects—like other people—foreign to their universe.

Hangmen Also Die! (1943), from a story by "Bert Brecht" and Fritz Lang (as the screen credits list them), is one of Lang's most uneven films. The "inspirational" scenes of Czech resistance to the Nazi occupation in World War II are the worst. Even if one could accept Brian Donlevy, Walter Brennan, and Dennis O'Keefe as good Czech citizens, one would have trouble with Anna Lee, who projects all her emotions in the worst way. The second half of the movie—the frame-up of an informer—is standard Lang thriller stuff, both clever and contrived, over-elaborate yet sometimes exciting. It's indicative of the film's general unevenness that one of the most devastating bits—a man's bowler hat rocking back and forth until it stops, as he dies offscreen—is preceded by the awkwardly staged, fast-motion smothering of the same man. And while the Czechs in the film are generalized, cardboard "good people," the Germans—Reinhold Schuenzel, Alexander Granach, Tonio Selwart, and Louis Donath—are, surprisingly, very vividly individualized, in all their petty self-indulgence and spleen. They might be Johnny and Kitty in the Third Reich. It is uncertain whether Lang sees Nazism as perfectly accommodating their personalities or vice versa. But his witty pinioning of the Gestapo officers almost makes *Hangmen Also Die!* "must" viewing, despite its weaknesses and length (over 130 minutes).

Ministry of Fear (1944), perhaps the weakest third of Lang's mid-forties Dan Duryea trilogy, is hardly required viewing. It has a mildly intriguing plot (from a Graham Greene novel), with a World War II backdrop, and is well paced. Occasionally, it even has a hint of a purpose behind its bland forties-Paramount appearance, as if the blandness of its lighting and sets and its lead actors were ironically intended, concealing some dark truths or mysteries. But the presence of stars Ray Milland and Marjorie Reynolds insures that blandness will prevail. The pathetic last shot—which shows the two smiling big, "happy ending" smiles in a car, against badly-back-projected scenery—is the signature of a studio product, not a director or a writer. Irony is some other planet. Both Milland and Reynolds have tragic pasts in the movie, but you couldn't tell it from their faces, which look freshly cleaned and pressed—worry-and-wrinkle-free—and not from Milland's bland light-comedy delivery. There's a large gap between what we see in the film's present and what we hear about the characters' past.

After seeing *Ministry of Fear*, you remember the bullet-hole of light in the apartment door near the end. But you probably do not remember who shot whom, and for good reason—it hardly matters. Just before the hole appears, Nazi Carl Esmond calls out, "You wouldn't shoot your own brother!" Marjorie does shoot him, but her big, dumb smile in the last image says—without irony—that there was nothing to it really. How does a critic get Lang out of this narrative spot? If he is David Thomson, he begins by suggesting that the doorways in *Ministry of Fear* "become as prominent as the characters"—failing to note that they do so almost by default. In a successful Lang film there is a counterpoint, an interplay between actors and architecture—but the furniture does not take over. In *Ministry of Fear*—with its actors-in-name-only—even a doorknob can become a star.

Thomson concedes that the "pinpoint of light" is "melodrama that muffles a sister killing her brother. . . ." But don't go away. That pinpoint is more than just "melodrama"—it's "part of Lang's insinuation that spatial relationships are as profound as human relations. Doors last, but human beings pass in and out. The door stays to the bitter end." Dubious considering the facts that (a) in the course of the film at least three doors are blown out and apart (along with walls and roofs) by bombs, or are broken, and (b) the film is set in wartime London during the blitz, a bad time for doors. Doors "pass in and out" too, at least figuratively, and they pass out here in at least as many pieces as the human beings do—Lang and the Mutability of Doors? In *Ministry of Fear* only those big dumb smiles last.

Cloak and Dagger (1946), yet another of Lang's World War II dramas, is flimsy taken either as a suspenser or as a character study. The lighting (Sol Polito, photographer) is evocative Warners "noir," but the treatment of the subject—OSS operations inside wartime Germany—is strictly

Hollywooden, full of instant characterizations-through-dialogue of Gary Cooper, Lilli Palmer, Vladimir Sokoloff, Helene Thimig. Palmer: "If you fight scum, you become scum." Cooper: "Why do you keep whipping yourself?" The characters' emotional-fireworks displays are unearned, gratuitous—as in *Ministry of Fear* the past remains sealed off from the present. Lang has to content his artistic self with shooting the main characters in mirrors, a reflex gesture left over from *M* and *Woman in the Window*.

In the fifties, Lang majored in "B"-film variations on *Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street:* in *House by the River* (1950) and *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), the protagonist, "once off guard" (the title of the source book for *Woman in the Window*), kills or appears to have killed someone. In *House by the River* Louis Hayward, Jane Wyatt, and (strike three) Lee Bowman are helpless with the ungainly speeches and actions the script gives them. The river itself is interesting—the story is punctuated by eerie shots of fish leaping, branches, moonlight, a dead cow floating down the river. But the film—one of Lang's very worst—is near-nil on suspense, acting, characterization, and dialogue.

The *Blue Gardenia* is smooth and bland—a plot, with no overtones, undertones, or point—Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (down to the artist-seducer as victim) with nothing on it. Only Raymond Burr as the artist adds a bit of tone. The film has a "B"-mentality script, a "B" look, "B" acting, a budding "B" romance between Anne Baxter and Richard Conte, and a laughably hasty "B" wrap-up. *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) is all plot too, with no humor, characters, or life to distract the viewer from the course of that plot—the Lang express makes few stops. The film exists solely for its twist ending. Though Barbara Nichols is amusing, in a small role as a loud blonde, the other characters are stick figures who twist and turn when the plot twists and turns. Lang's *Human Desire* (1954) is a dully written and acted remake of Renoir's 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, and *Moonfleet* (1955), a routine costumer, has a little of everything—action, suspense, comedy, horror (including a terrific gleaming-eyed statue in a cemetery)—but not much of anything in the way of narrative interest—which is not quite the same thing as plot.

Slightly more interesting than these "B" 's is *Clash by Night* (1952), Lang's version of a Clifford Odets play. At least it's character-centered, though it tends to package its people too neatly. Each character's pluses and minuses are carefully identified and labelled: Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Ryan, and Paul Douglas as the three corners of a romantic triangle each have affecting scenes, but you are too aware of when, say, you're seeing her "selfish" side and when you're seeing her "selfless" side—the result perhaps of Odet's or Lang's idea of "balanced characterization." And Stanwyck gets tough too often too colorfully. (Stanwyck on Ryan: "He could yank out my teeth and use them for watch fobs.") Ryan has some strong moments as the cynical-to-nihilistic projectionist, but he's a bit too extreme a character to be a believable romantic possibility for Stanwyck, even at her most colorful—sometimes he seems hardly a human possibility. The result is that Stanwyck ends up fluctuating crazily between Douglas ("security") and Ryan ("adventure"). As in *Woman in the Window*, security wins.

Why was Lang so often cast in the role of hack, peddling plots? Was he typed for thrillers—Hitchcock, Jr.? Or did his semi-adolescent fascination with the intricacies of pulp crime stories simply happen to mesh with the demands of a plot-centered American film industry? Whatever the explanation for this casting, his professional quandary was unfortunate, because the presence in Lang's films of such startling characters as Johnny and Kitty in *Scarlet Street*, the Gestapo people in *Hangmen Also Die!* and Ryan's character in *Clash by Night* suggests that he had a darker talent, one that too often went untapped or underexercised, in both his German and his American films. Thrillers may too often have been an "escape" for him as well as for his audience. The German *M* (1931) and the American *Fury* (1936) are pivotal cases. They might at first glance appear to be relatively pure incarnations of the darker Lang. A child murderer and mob violence, respectively, are their subjects. But each film is really two films in one.

Lang and von Harbou devote a full 90 minutes of *M* to an intricate double-dragnet—one by criminals, one by police—for the murderer. The extended comparison-contrast between the two

forces—united in purpose, separated by the law—is amusing but ultimately frustrating: it constitutes a withholding of the film's real subject—the configuration of the murderer's psyche. It's like a pair of tweezers that enables Lang to hold his subject at arm's length. When the murderer, Becker (Peter Lorre), accuses his captors, "You safecrackers and burglars shouldn't be proud of yourselves," he might be indicting the Lang who—like the criminals—loves to plan and plot and map out operations. The first 90 minutes of *M* are almost bereft of meaning until Becker "informs" them. Thanks principally to Lorre, Becker's climactic, 15-minute "speech" has a rhetorical if not quite a dramatic power.

As Becker, Lorre has to say too much, the better to inform the rest of the film. But he is at the same time, in effect, informing the rest of Lang too—the darker, more interesting Lang that is. "I don't want to [kill], but I can't help it": Becker's compulsiveness is also that of Johnny in *Scarlet Street*, the Ryan character in *Clash by Night*, the mob and—in the second half of *Fury*—the Spencer Tracy character, the Mabuse-haunted Dr. Baum in *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the robot Maria in *Metropolis*. These characters resemble the unstoppable "monsters" in Howard Hawk's films—Tony Camonte *(Scarface)*, Oscar Jaffe *(Twentieth Century)*, Walter Burns *(His Girl Friday)*—but the latter comprise only one exhibit among many in Hawks's gallery of characters. Lang seemed to have the knack for creating and illuminating only this one type of creature. This gift, however, proved (when exercised) to be a formidable one. It's not the momentary slip of the Robinson characters—"once off guard"—in *Scarlet Street* and *Woman in the Window* which drives Becker to kill. The latter two films peel away "fate," or rather "situation," from "character." The two forces are one, in *M*, in the person of Becker—"myself pursuing myself" as he bitterly exclaims. The figures of Baum-Mabuse and Becker posit a pursuing Fate which is an internal force rather than just a kind of glue in which one happens to become stuck.

While the City Sleeps (1956) qualifies as Lang's loose, American version of *M*, with John Barrymore, Jr., as the compulsive killer, and with a pulp plot about unlovely people in the publishing world as the "tweezers": pulp material usually

M: *Peter Lorre's "trial"*

transcended Lang rather than vice versa. Heavy instant psychology vies with amusing actor bits and lines in a film which is by turns witty, silly, and dull, and is actually little more evasive than *M* itself, though it's a less even film.

Fury attempts to situate its lynch-mob story within the story of a "typical American couple"—Tracy and two-note Sylvia Sidney again. (The first note: sickly sweet; the second: piteous.) The larger story does not survive the inevitable, and perhaps necessary, compression and the schematic plot, in which elements like peanuts, a torn coat, and Tracy's misspelling of the word "memento" turn up with too-handy regularity. However, the mob sequences themselves, and the scenes of the newsreels singling out members of that mob—and isolating their awful exultation—still carry a surprising impact. Like the scenes of Glenn Ford exacting revenge for the murder of his wife in Lang's later *The Big Heat* (1953), the best sequences in *Fury* portray a frightening "right" or "good" run wild—small town citizens burning a jail that houses a supposed kidnapper; later the victim of this assault (Tracy) wreaking legal revenge on them. Lang gets the viewer rooting *for* and *against* the "good guy"—Tracy, Ford—at the same time. One becomes caught between exultation and horror, as the punishment—the act of revenge—takes on the configuration of the crime. Only then does Lang appear to be exploring the implications of the action and violence in his films, the implications of his fascination with violent crime. (He once wrote an article titled, "Why I Am Interested in Murder.") Only then does he seem to illuminate both the subjective attraction and the objective ugliness of violence.

The Big Heat is even more disjointed than *Fury*, taking off as it does in a new narrative direction every 15 minutes or so. But it is admirable at suggesting the double-edged wrath of the righteous—Ford seething and fuming with contempt for everyone he meets; Gloria Grahame returning Lee Marvin's favor of boiling coffee in the face. When other members of the cast comment on Ford's strange single-mindedness, he just seethes harder. Though Lang perhaps *intends* his actor to look a trifle foolish, Ford's intentness at times recalls Robert Young and his silly "grim determination" look in *Western Union* (1941), a happily forgotten Lang Western.

Lang made two camp versions of the *M-Fury-The Big Heat* syndrome—*Rancho Notorious* (1952) and *Secret beyond the Door . . .* (1948)—which are far from good but also far from dull. The more celebrated of the two, *Rancho Notorious*—weakest of Lang's revenge sagas—is striking, garish, fast moving, always faintly ridiculous, and sometimes—as with "The Ballad of Chuck-a-Luck" (and its "hate, murder and revenge") and Arthur Kennedy's "maddened with revenge" routine—wholly ridiculous.

James Agee called *Secret beyond the Door . . .* "a worthless movie," and one can certainly understand the harshness of his judgment: somewhere, he must have thought, there's someone who might take this movie *seriously*. But Agee could not quite have foreseen that Lotte Eisner would find in it a "poetic-dreamlike fluidum which gives credibility and logic to events which would otherwise be only melodrama," though he would, I'm sure, have appreciated her discovery of this magical fluidum. *Secret* is certainly not "only melodrama," a charge that may apply to four out of five Lang films, but not to this one. It's closer to something like camp horror-romance-psychological drama. It switches gears with hilarious abruptness: psychopathic Michael Redgrave, about to throttle wife Joan Bennett, will suddenly stop and reminisce: "I *remember*. It was summer. . . . " We (and he) then learn why he is about to strangle her, and also—not incidentally—why he is obsessed with lilacs. He now no longer feels he has to murder her; she can relax. Meanwhile, however, someone has set the place on fire. . . . The pulpy, stream-of-consciousness narration by Bennett ("Why did I suddenly think of daffodils?") is an unintentional joy in itself, and the movie's big surprise and shock scenes are more comic than horrific. Only spoilsports will object that this is Lang making a joke of *M*.

The emotional "fury" of Lang's *Fury* and *The Big Heat* seems to have had its source in the second half of Lang's silent version of *Die Nibelungen—Kriemhild's Revenge* (1924). The first half, *Siegfried*, is like a static prologue, but *Kriemhild's Revenge* is powerful and, finally, even disturbing. The implacability of character suggested by the cry, in *M*, of "The only thing that will stop you is death!" also informs the action of *Kriemhild's Revenge*, in which (unlike *Metropolis*) differences between the principals—Kriemhild, Hagen, Attila—are not subject to arbitration. Justified revenge becomes slaughter as Kriemhild's foes fall, and "right" becomes indistinguishable from "wrong."

But this theme of implacability finds what may be its most moving expression in Lang in, surprisingly—since it is so little shown or seen—*Liliom* (1934), his joyous adaptation of the Molnar play, and perhaps his finest film. There must have been something in the atmosphere in France at the time—and something in Molnar conducive to Lang's own talent. The rhetorical power of the last 15 minutes of *M* becomes the sustained comic-dramatic power of *Liliom*, in which the protagonist's compulsion is not only named but analyzed. Becker's cry of "I can't help it!", vividly visualized in the newsreel freezes on the mob members in *Fury*, Lang first caught on a film-within-a-film in *Liliom:* the heavenly officials weighing the evidence for and against Liliom (Charles Boyer, probably the best he has ever been) run him a scene from his life—during an argument, he slaps his girl, Julie (Madeleine Ozeray)—pinpointing for him and them his responsibility for his actions.

Liliom, like Becker, finds he can't escape himself. Yet when his thoughts while slapping Julie are made audible—as the film is run again in slow motion—they are: "Stop . . . stop . . . stop. . . . " At the same time that this film-within-a-film is establishing Liliom's responsibility for his past actions, it is also establishing that there is another, contrary force—another Liliom—who is as much a victim of those actions as Julie is. This

LILIOM: *Charles Boyer and Viviane Romance (bow in hair)*

brief scene drawn from Liliom's life records both the fact of his responsibility and his recognition of that fact: if, visually, it anticipates the newsreel freezes in *Fury*, the words "Stop . . . stop . . . stop . . . " anticipate the look of horror on the one defendant's face in the same film when Sylvia Sidney—testifying about Tracy and herself before his apparent death in the burning jail—says simply, "We were going to be married." In both cases, in both films, recognition comes too late.

The film-within-a-film in *Liliom* is neither condemnation nor exoneration of Liliom. It's only a description of someone both controlling and controlled by his actions, accountable yet helpless. In the film, Liliom is shuttled back and forth between heaven and earth, purgatory and hell, in a very determined celestial attempt to find just the right place for him. The problem is that from one angle, he's guilty; from another, innocent. He is punished, repentant, yet incorrigible; nearly damned by his misdeeds, finally saved by his almost-good-deeds.

Astonishingly, *Liliom* has not been generally available in the United States for many years. It has been shown recently only without titles or with hastily improvised English titles at a few museums. When the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held their Fritz Lang retrospective in 1969, the director appeared in person and chose *Liliom* as the film to represent him on opening night. The legacy of Lang the artist is mostly one of parts of films—parts of *Scarlet Street, Testament of Dr. Mabuse, Fury, M, Hangmen Also Die!*, and *The Big Heat.* But it's also the whole of *Kriemhild's Revenge* and, perhaps above all, *Liliom*, the two decided exceptions to the rule of Lang the melodramatist, the Lang shallowly fascinated by crime and violence and psychopathology. Only in *Kriemhild's Revenge* and *Liliom* does that fascination become the *subject* of the film, and the impersonal become personal.

NOTES

1. In "Structures of Narrativity in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*" (*Film Quarterly*, Summer 1974), Alan Williams describes Maria's kidnapping in semiological terms: "The next narrative function in the film is the abduction of Maria by Rotwang from the catacombs to his house—a typical narrative transfer complete with spatial discontinuity." His essay's semiological tests are intended to yield meaning from "the profoundly resonant text of *Metropolis*. . . . " But the tendency of his art-is-a-science rhetoric is away from rather than toward meaning—toward, rather, simple restatement of the plot in abstruse, "scientific" terms.

2. Alfred Appel, Jr., (*Film Comment*, Nov.-Dec., 1974) finds pathos in "the definitive self-knowledge supplied by Wanley's nightmare," but the story of a man who discovers that he's dull is not necessarily sad.

MARSHA KINDER

The Power of Adaptation in **Apocalypse Now**

Lately Francis has been talking about his fears. His fears that he can't write an ending for his film. His fear that he can't write. That his greatest success has come from adapting someone else's writing. My guess is that when he gives up, when he concludes he is not the kind of novelist or playwright he dreamed of being as a young boy, he will know what kind of a writer he is and it will be more right for him than anything he could have imagined. —Eleanor Coppola, *Notes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979)

Francis Ford Coppola takes the same approach to adaptation that he takes to the film industry. He adopts someone else's material or structure, absorbs and expands it by identifying it with his own experience, and thereby transforms it into his own uniquely powerful vision. This approach worked brilliantly in *The Godfather*, which proved that an adaptive auteur could be just as personally expressive as a Bergman, Fellini, or Buñuel. It demonstrated that Coppola's ability to look inward with such intensity and to attend to the smallest physical details also enabled him to perform a more comprehensive analysis of the social political forces of the entire nation. This film was a landmark both in defining the nature of Coppola's genius and in launching his ambitious scheme of adapting the industry. It brought him the money and power to build an alternative film structure, under his own control, that might rival Hollywood economically while making superior films artistically.

When anyone in America achieves this kind of power, it arouses both adoration and anger. That's why it was so easy for Hollywood to get rid of Chaplin and Welles. Now there seems to be a growing desire to "get" Coppola, to watch his personal empire crumble. Even in reviews that acknowledge the aesthetic power of *Apocalypse Now*, several critics choose a tone of ridicule or revilement; some even attack him for daring to "cannibalize" Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The intensity of the response may be, in part, a reaction to the film's elaborate promotion, which has invited viewers to see it historically as another cultural landmark (that cost years and millions in the making and that now requires advance ticket bookings in the selling) and self-reflexively as a saga of Coppola's personal struggles. The promotion encourages us to identify Coppola both with Willard and Kurtz[1]; to admire his courage in risking his health, happiness, and personal fortune on this film; and to sympathize with his admitted failure in finding the right ending. Some critics may resent the fact that Coppola and company have anticipated most of their negative perceptions, so they compensate by exaggerating the note of condemnation in their tone. The irony is that many of the points stressed by the pompous promotion are actually insightful. This is particularly true of Eleanor Coppola's strange journal, whose publication was coordinated with the opening of the film. It's hard to tell to what degree *Notes* is a reliable account of the decision-making process and to what degree it is merely more promotional hype. One can easily imagine Francis standing behind the scenes, adapting his wife's book (with or without her awareness) as a vehicle for expressing ideas that might be embarrassing for him to say himself. Yet the book is still illuminating about the film and thus is repeatedly quoted in reviews.

In *Apocalpyse Now* Coppola uses the same approach to adaptation that succeeded in *The Godfather*, but this time he is only partially successful for his attempts to personalize the material interfere with the portrayal of the historical events. Where he does succeed brilliantly is in creating a dual perspective on the war as both an internal and external nightmare. Like *The Deer Hunter*,

APOCALYPSE NOW

Apocalypse Now illuminates the powerful impact the war had on American consciousness rather than its effects on the Vietnamese, but Coppola's vision is so much broader than Cimino's, and the sense of being immersed in warfare is so much more vivid and compelling, that it's as if we were seeing a film dealing with this subject for the first time.

Heart of Darkness provides the structure for the inward journey; the Vietnam war provides the outward focus. Although John Milius (who wrote the original screenplay) was the first to bring the two together, the fusion could have resulted in a disaster like his *Big Wednesday*. Coppola took over the combination and introduced many changes to make it work.[2] In using *Heart of Darkness* to illuminate our experience of the war, the film demonstrates the extraordinary power of Conrad's vision while making the exploration of Vietnam primary, as it should be. This is the delicate balance that Coppola tries to maintain, a goal which is made explicit in the promotional brochure distributed in the theater:

> The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of *Apocalypse Now* was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war. . . . I tried to illustrate as many of its different facets as possible. And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars.

Although Coppola succeeds in creating an overpowering sensuous experience of the war's madness—perhaps better than any previous war films—he confuses the moral issues, perhaps because of his drive to personalize the material. In identifying so strongly with Kurtz, he distorts the issue of power and upsets the delicate balance between the Conrad story and the subject of Vietnam. The film succeeds in forcing us to experience the horror of the war and to acknowledge our own complicity in it, but it fails to illuminate the nature of Kurtz's horror.

Martin Sheen in APOCALYPSE NOW

The film opens with quiet jungle sounds and a graceful line of palm trees, waving gently in a breeze. Smoke drifts upward from the foreground, and a faint sound (that could be either modern electronic music or some kind of engine) fades in from the background. As a whirling propeller arcs across the top of the screen, we know the sound is made by an army helicopter. As another chopper streaks across the sky, the smoke and noise become more intense. Suddenly the jungle bursts into a fiery hell of napalm, and the sound track assaults us with Jim Morrison singing "This is the end, beautiful friend." The camera pans right as another chopper crosses the screen in the opposite

direction, further disorienting us with these counter movements. A huge upside-down close-up of Willard's head is superimposed over the jungle on the left side of the screen. This dissolve moves us inward to the Saigon hotel room where Willard is having a mental breakdown and inward to his mind which is projecting these jungle memories and nightmares. On the right side of the screen we see an overhead fan superimposed over the image of the helicopter, dissolving the boundaries between the hotel room and the jungle. As the jungle background turns to night, the right side of the screen dissolves into a huge statue of Buddha's head, which is neither in the room nor the jungle, but is pure imaginative projection. This head not only matches the huge close-up of Willard, but also mysteriously foreshadows his obsession with Kurtz. When Willard opens his eyes, he stares at the overhead fan, as if recognizing the specific image that triggered the nightmare. But the sound of choppers continues in the room. He moves to the window and looks out at the sunny Saigon streets, where helicopters buzz overhead; then he begins the voice-over narration that dominates the film, "Saigon . . . shit! . . . I'm still only in Saigon." We soon learn that this narration is told from the perspective of the future. Then follows a strange montage of bizarre images from Willard's mind and external shots of his freakout, which are linked by dissolves.

This opening sequence, which was not in Milius's original script and has no parallel in the Conrad story, dissolves all boundaries between inner and outer experience, between past, present and future. It introduces a visual style that is strongly marked by superimpositions and cross dissolves, suggesting the multilayered nature of experience. It also introduces the recurring images of fire and smoke, which obscure vision with their terrifying beauty; helicopters, which are more omnipresent and dangerous than any jungle creature; and detached heads, which lead us inward to the focus on madness and horror. The sequence strongly suggests that all footage in this film is filtered through a subjective consciousness.

Apocalypse Now must be seen both as a nightmarish vision of the historical events and as an exploration of one man's journey through madness. This double perspective, so vivid in the opening sequence, is rooted in the narration Conrad gives to Marlow. On the one hand, Marlow insists "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes it truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence . . . we live, as we dream—alone."[3] Yet he proceeds with his story anyway because "it seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts." The true story of the Vietnam war is also impossible to tell; Coppola's film is as haunting as Conrad's story because it illuminates the madness and horror of the Americans who experienced it. No matter how good or how strong, everyone who was touched by that war had a change in consciousness. Not only the fighting men, but also those who experienced the war secondhand—through accounts by veterans, through television coverage, and now through seeing *Apocalypse Now.* Just as Marlow's listeners accused him of being a storyteller who was "unaware of what [his] audience would best like to hear," many viewers don't like Coppola's vision of the war. Many would prefer to hear that all the atrocities were committed only on one side or that it was possible to come back from Vietnam heroic and improved—like DeNiro in *The Deer Hunter.* But *Apocalypse Now* denies this by showing that even the invulnerable heroes—Kilgore, Willard, and Kurtz—are driven mad, each in his own special way. Willard tells us explicitly that the story is essentially a confession.

Coppola rarely hesitates to change Conrad's story—setting, events, characters—whenever the revision is required by the Vietnam context. In fact, the first half of the original story is omitted almost entirely. Coppola picks up Conrad's narrative line with the natives' attack on the boat (which occurs more than 90 minutes into the film). Even here there are significant setting changes, for the primitive weapons are more ironic in the Vietnam setting and the black victim at the wheel who is killed by a spear is not a foolish tribesman but an angry black soldier who challenges Willard's authority at every turn. The man dies, not merely with a terrible frown, but with a desperate effort to take Willard with him, by drawing him down on the spear.

Despite the substantial changes, the film is

amazingly true to the story's core of meaning—its "heart of immense darkness" and to the dream-like suggestiveness cultivated by Conrad's narrator Charlie Marlow.

> "I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged in every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares." (p. 144)

The dialogue in the film—especially Willard's voice-over narration, written by Michael Herr (author of *Dispatches*, the noted personal account of Vietnam)—has been attacked by many critics for sounding more like a parody of Raymond Chandler than an adaptation of Conrad. But Willard's tone and character are obviously not intended to be Marlow's. To suit the Vietnam context, the narrator has been completely transformed into a trained assassin, whose life has been drained of all meaning—except for his obsession with combat and Kurtz. Coppola may have used this narration to cover for Martin Sheen, who suffered a heart attack while playing Willard, or to give himself greater flexibility in making revisions. But the selection of Herr also strengthens the dual perspective of the personal/historical account, for his first-person point-of-view is based on actual participation in the historical events. Marlow's words would have been unrealistic in the Vietnam context. Even Willard's banalities, when set against Coppola's powerful visual images and multi-layered sound track, still have behind them the "terrific suggestiveness" of Conrad's illuminations.

Coppola also retains Conrad's central image of the river, which dominates the narrative in both works. The frame of Conrad's story opens with the Thames, which lies before Marlow and his listeners and merges with the Congo, the river that lies at the heart of Kurtz's inner story. Marlow describes the Congo as "an immense snake uncoiled" that "fascinated me as a snake would a bird." The structure of the film is controlled by the image of the river "that snaked through the war like a main circuit cable," carrying Willard to Cambodia, where no American troops are supposed to be. In both versions, the river ultimately leads to Kurtz and his dying words of horror. It's when Coppola leaves the river that his difficulties begin.

Coppola's primary failure in combining the Conrad story and the Vietnam war is in the adaptation of Kurtz, the only character whom he retains in recognizable form. The original Kurtz is corrupted by his isolation in the wilderness, which leads to an obsession with power and reveals terrifying truths about himself.

> "I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with his great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core." (p. 133)

Coppola echoes the "hollowness" by having Kurtz recite T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," but this is a symbolic solution that doesn't really make sense in the Vietnam context. Vietnam seldom offered the feeling of power to American fighting men that the Congo offered to Kurtz. In fact, generally they were forced to see just the opposite—their own powerlessness in facing inferior-equipped guerillas who refused to be defeated in the jungle terrain.

The turning point for Brando's Kurtz came when he realized what it took to win in this war—the kind of total commitment that enabled the enemy to hack off the arms of small children who had been inoculated by the Americans. When Kurtz first saw the dismembered arms, he was overcome with horror and grief, but then he realized with super-clarity "as if [he'd] been shot with a diamond bullet in [his] head," that this was an act of great moral strength and genius. These enemies were not monsters, but moral men who were able to use the primordial urge to kill without passion and judgment. If Kurtz had ten divisions of men like these, he could end the war. And that's presumably what he tried to do—to build an army of such followers, to act on primordial urges, to make horror and moral terror his friends. But he was defeated because he could not give up judgment. Immediately after his monologue, he tells Willard "I'm worried about my son . . . that he might not understand." He fears his son will judge him, and this fear makes horror his enemy and victory seem hollow. As critics have pointed out, this key incident of the inoculation was not based on historical fact, but certainly there were equally terrible atrocities committed on

both sides. The point is that Coppola was using this incident dramatically to shift the central issue from power to efficiency—a theme that would work both in Africa and Vietnam.[4]

Marlow introduces his narrative with a statement about "devotion to efficiency"—the idea which underlies the profitable ivory trade and justifies ruthless exploitation. This passage applies equally well to the Vietnam war because they are both phases of western imperialism.

> "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to." (p. 70)

Although Coppola doesn't retain this speech, it is the basis for the dramatic incidents that unite Kurtz and Williard—Kurtz's recounting of the inoculation story and Willard's murder of the wounded Vietnamese woman on the boat. Both men are thrust into a war situation where military efficiency is totally undermined, yet they have been trained to worship it and to internalize it as the source of their own personal pride. So they impose their own idea of efficiency, even when it contradicts orders from above or other compelling values such as human compassion. After experiencing the economic exploitation and sexual taunting at the USO performance, Willard muses: "Charlie didn't get much USO. He was dug in too deep . . . He had only two ways home—death or victory." Willard clearly shares Kurtz's admiration for the enemy's efficiency as well as his contempt for the leadership on their side: "The war was being run by a bunch of four-star clowns who were going to give the whole circus away." When Willard first hears of Kurtz and his execution of four spies—an efficient action that nevertheless leads to charges of murder—we can see that he admires Kurtz's move and would have done the same thing in his place. Yet Willard still accepts the assassination assignment. At the end both men realize why it is essential for Willard to kill Kurtz. Willard understands why Kurtz can never go home again since he, himself, has been there and back. Both men know that if Kurtz stays in Vietnam, the horror will only escalate. This is as true for Willard (and for all US troops) as it is for Kurtz. Yet Willard has to survive so that he can serve as "the caretaker of Kurtz's memory." Both men have to make a personal sacrifice—to die, or to survive and remember. Both are subjected to judgment. There is no way out either for victim or killer.

If the devotion to efficiency were carried to its logical extreme in an insane situation like Vietnam, then it would lead to the ultimate madness —total annihilation of the enemy. In both the story and the film, Kurtz reaches this mad conclusion, which he scrawls in his memoirs—"Exterminate all the brutes," or "Drop the bombs. Exterminate them all." It's the same conclusion that was reached by Ahab, Hitler, and Charlie Manson (who is so pointedly mentioned in the film). It's a conclusion that ultimately demands the moral and physical destruction of both sides.

Unfortunately, Coppola confuses this "devotion to efficiency" with the issue of power. Conrad's Kurtz pursues efficiency only until he understands that it is merely a means of gaining greater power; once immersed in his obsession, he totally embraces madness, and gives up efficiency. It's not that he has "unsound methods," but "no methods at all." While Coppola retains these lines about "methods," his Kurtz clings to the ideal of efficiency right to the end because it's the only part of his behavior that makes sense in Vietnam.

His relationship with the tribal followers—supposedly Montagnard soldiers—is particularly problematic. Coppola retains the relationship from the Congo, where the white trader exerts his power as a god over a primitive people. We are told that Kurtz's followers take his every word as their command, but supposedly that's because he at first managed to get practical results. Since we never see these actions dramatized, it is hard to believe that his role as God actually achieves greater military efficiency. What this relationship between Kurtz and his followers does imply is a complete passivity and demoralization of the Montagnards, who historically are known to have been quite independent and strong. This is one aspect of the story that seems to be carried over from Conrad for purely symbolic reasons.

Why should Coppola have clung to a conception of Kurtz corrupted by power when it so clearly

distorts the facts of the war? Certainly the answer can't be simply that he was trying to be faithful to Conrad, for, as we have seen, elsewhere he makes radical changes in the story. Moreover, Coppola must have been aware that this Kurtz could not work realistically in the Vietnam context, for he purposely shifts to a symbolic treatment. Eleanor Coppola blames this decision on Brando.

> Brando was going to do something he had never tried before. He was going to play a bigger-than-life character, a mythical figure, a theatrical personage. He is the master of of the natural realistic performance and he was going to go for a different style of acting for the first time in his career. (p. 127)

She also blames it on his physical condition.

> Marlon was supposed to be lean and hard in order to play a Green Beret officer, but when he arrived hopelessly overweight, he had to give up his preconceptions about the character and come up with a solution which pushed the film much more in the direction of a myth. (p. 155)

Elsewhere she acknowledges that both men were responsible for this interpretation of Kurtz.

> Francis had asked Marlon to reread *Heart of Darkness.* Now Marlon was saying how his character should be more like Kurtz was in the book. Francis said, "Yes, that's what I've been trying to tell you." (p. 128)

She also quotes Coppola as saying: "I don't make the person play the part, I make the part play the person." (p. 157) I suspect that for the part of Kurtz, Coppola was referring not only to Brando as the "person" but also to himself. The most plausible explanation for Coppola's retention of Kurtz's obsession with power is his own "irresistible fascination" with this dimension of the story, which applied to his own experience of making the film.

Coppola consistently makes directorial choices that emphasize Kurtz's symbolic nature. In the story, Marlow describes him as a man who "presented himself as a voice" (p. 119). Like the Platonic conception of creation, Kurtz is experienced as a chain of divine or demonic echoes, which is emphasized by Conrad's complex narrative structure. Since the story is told by one of Marlow's listeners, we are several persons removed from Kurtz's actual words, yet we still experience their impact. Although Coppola simplifies the point of view to Willard's first-person narration and the film medium allows us to experience Kurtz directly, Coppola amplifies his image through media presentation. We first hear his voice through a tape of a radio broadcast, we first see his face in photographs, and are introduced to his character through an official dossier. The character is also media-amplified through the casting of Marlon Brando, who increasingly plays cultural icons (e.g., *The Godfather*, the father of *Superman*, and George Lincoln Rockwell in *Roots II*).

Despite this amplification, the character never achieves the moral stature of Conrad's shadowy Kurtz, who set out to civilize the natives and who sincerely believed in his moral aspirations. Coppola's Kurtz is merely an excellent soldier (perhaps like a Patton), who, though disobedient and obstreperous, was able to fight better than anyone else within the normal rules of war. When Kurtz discovers that those rules don't apply, he makes up his own in order to get results. And somehow (we never really see exactly how), this shift drives him mad. But clearly this interpretation of Kurtz was too vague and banal, so Coppola and Brando try to compensate with symbolic visual enrichment. Kurtz is no longer tall and thin—"an animated image of death carved out of old ivory," but a paunchy Buddha. His baldness is retained, but its meaning transformed.

Conrad used it to link him with the ivory he pursued:

> "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish imitation." (P. 121)

The film uses Kurtz's baldness to strengthen his identification with Buddha.[5] The first time we see Kurtz (more than two hours into the film), his face is in shadow and only the dome of his bald head is illuminated, as if he were a moon god presiding over darkness. This shot is linked to the chain of head images that run through the film. The decapitated heads are part of the original story, but they are intensified visually through direct presentation and dramatically by making one of the victims a companion of Willard's. The huge inverted close-up of Willard and the matched head of Buddha in the opening sequence introduce this motif and foreshadow Willard's identification with the godlike Kurtz.

Coppola strengthens the symbolic identification

of Kurtz as Willard's Shadow, a move that was undoubtedly facilitated by his own identification with both characters. This Jungian relationship is developed visually in the last photograph and first live footage of Kurtz, both of which present him primarily in shadow. Repeatedly, we see silhouettes of Kurtz artfully framed by a doorway, sometimes with a beast posed in the foreground. By making the purpose of Willard's quest the assassination of Kurtz, Coppola also suggests a totemic identification between hunter and prey—a connection that is developed dramatically by intercutting his murder with the ritualistic slaughter of the water buffalo. This connection is underlined rather pretentiously when the camera passes across Kurtz's copies of Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Weston's *From Ritual to Romance.* Perhaps this totemic relationship serves as a substitute for the identification between Kurtz and his ivory in the original story. But Coppola uses it to give an ironic twist to Willard's romantic quest, where the slain dragon turns out to be another version of the self. At the beginning of the film Willard, the war hero, is locked in a Saigon hotel room, cut off from home, drunk and self-destructive. As an emblem of his personal deterioration, he shatters a mirror and cuts himself. It is precisely at this point that his Mission arrives to put the pieces back together again. He becomes obsessed with studying Kurtz, whose dossier substitutes for letters from home. In hunting him, he moves deeper into himself for in Kurtz he sees a reflection of his own madness at a more advanced stage. Eventually he decides to reject the armed forces and pursue his own will like Kurtz. But in the end, Willard discovers that he is the instrument of Kurtz's will—the means of his suicide and the embodiment of his reincarnation. He survives as a reflection—refusing to replace Kurtz as a false god, but echoing his dying words of horror.

By identifying Kurtz so strongly with Willard—and by implication with the other American fighting men who were driven mad by the war—Coppola undermines the character's dramatic power. In Conrad's story, Kurtz is set much more apart. Although he embodies all of Europe, he is a "universal genius" who demonstrates what lies in store for those who dare to look into the abyss. Like an Ahab or a Hitler, he demonstrates how an extreme obsession with idealism can lead to the total embracing of evil. Marlow admires Kurtz's romantic extremity and his courage in choosing his own nightmare. He interprets his dying words, "the horror, the horror," as a judgment combining desire and hate. In stepping over the edge into madness, Kurtz achieves a "moral victory" by which Marlow realizes his own limitations and defeat. When Marlow is later faced with death, he has nothing to say. He merely survives. "The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets." This is what Marlow offers his listeners, what Conrad offers his readers, and what Coppola offers us as survivors of Vietnam. But the primary dramatic problem of the film is that we gain this kind of knowledge from our confrontation with the war, rather than with Kurtz—who nevertheless retains the climactic position in the narrative structure.

Despite the flaws in its handling of Kurtz, *Apocalypse Now* is still a masterful work that equals the power of Conrad's vision. In place of Kurtz, an orchestrated madness dominates the film—from the opening intense hotel scenes with Willard, through the chaotic battle sequences with Colonel Kilgore, the tragically absurd slaughter of the boat people, the hysterical USO performance, the nightmarish carnival of the trench warfare, the savagery at Kurtz's compound, and the closing shots of Willard, as mad as he was at the beginning. In practically every sequence, a sensuous beauty is combined with deadly terror, obscuring the boundaries between good and evil. This combination is particularly vivid in the scene where a tiger unexpectedly springs out of the lush green jungle, reminding us of Blake's "fearful symmetry." The madness dominates the editing rhythms, Vittorio Storaro's brilliant cinematography, Dean Tavoularis's apocalyptic sets, and the driving music and explosive sounds of war on the audio track. The cacophonous range of the madness is developed very powerfully in the characters, all brilliantly acted, who seem purposely directed in clashing tones and styles: Willard's intense, inward morbidity and clipped posturing cynicism; the absurd invulnerability of the highly stylized Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), who can respect a dying Viet Cong's courage and then callously

turn his back on the soldier's agony when distracted by the prospect of surfing; the realistic, tight-reigned explosiveness of the angry black leader Chief (Albert Hall); the zany comic exuberance of his young black buddy, Clean (Larry Fishburne)—"a rock 'n roller with one foot in the grave"; the frantic outbursts of Chef (Frederic Forest), who is wound too tight for war; the dehumanized bumping and grinding of the caricatured playmates (Cynthia Wood, Colleen Camp, and Linda Carpenter), who callously taunt the soldiers into an animal frenzy; the surreal reckless moves of the black soldiers in the trench, their eyes glazed over with junk or despair; and the bewildering manic speediness of the photojournalist (Dennis Hopper), who continues the media-amplification of Kurtz by converting the original lines of Conrad's harlequin into promotional hype ("He's up there!" "You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man," "This man has enlarged my mind," "His soul is mad!") and by playing Pip to Kurtz's Ahab and the Fool to Kurtz's Lear. The madness builds—partly through the slow transformation of Lance (Sam Bottoms), from a clean-cut, gun-shy surfer into an eccentric war-painted acid-head who moves through the war and the Montagnard rituals as if in a trance, accepting all horrors as part of the bummer. It is his acid vision that dominates the visuals in the powerful trench sequence; in this last outpost before Kurtz's compound, there is no command and no boundaries between dazzling beauty and blind destruction. Except for Willard, Lance (also known as L. B. Johnson) is the only one who survives the trip, implying that his zombie-like acceptance of madness is a viable defense.

In fact, the film shows no American in Vietnam who is untouched by madness. Not even the suave officers with their good manners and euphemistic language who give Willard his mission "to terminate Kurtz's command." In one shot we see a plate of bloody roast beef on the left side of the screen and a photograph of Kurtz on the right, foreshadowing his murder and revealing the butchering impulses of these officials. Later, Kurtz will strip away the lies.

KURTZ: Are you an assassin?

WILLARD: No, I'm a soldier.

KURTZ: You're neither. You're an errand boy for grocery clerks come to collect the price.

The pervasiveness of the madness is also developed in extraordinary battle scenes where the moral boundaries are totally confused. Kilgore's attack begins with a montage of the helicopters, exterior long shots of the ominous machines and close-ups of men in the interiors. Kilgore turns on Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" to orchestrate the attack and terrify the enemy. Although the music is stirring, it can't help but remind us of our German enemies in previous wars and prevent us from identifying totally with the American aggressors. When the film cuts to the target, we see school children lining up and hear dogs barking; as the music invades the scene, the children flee and the film cuts back and forth between both sides. In the midst of battle, the total panic is captured in the loud explosions and spatial disorientation. Movement comes from every angle and goes in every direction. Music and battle sounds collide in dissonance. When the perspective shifts to the helicopters' point of view, we get caught up in the realistic excitement and dangers of the attack. Significantly it's from this perspective that we see the first wounded American, a black man screaming in agony, and the destruction of the rescue helicopter by a grenade thrown by a young Vietnamese woman, with whom we were just sympathizing. By now our sympathies are split, and we are forced to see that for an American in Vietnam there was no way of escaping the moral quicksand. Throughout this battle neither Kilgore nor Willard is frightened by the prospect of death —for they are both absorbed in their personal

Dennis Hopper as the journalist: APOCALYPSE NOW

obsessions with surfing and with Kurtz. After the battle, Kilgore, in cavalry hat and yellow ascot, walks through the explosions proud and erect, as if he were made out of steel. Despite his eagerness to surf, he is distracted by the B-52's and the napalm, which bring the smell of victory. After observing him in battle, Willard says, "If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I wondered what they had against Kurtz."

Some critics argue that the battle scenes with Kilgore are the dramatic high point of the film. In his essay in the *New York Review of Books*, Michael Wood goes so far as to say that Kilgore *is* Kurtz, or should have been. While Kilgore is a very strong character, particularly as played by Duvall, he lacks the moral stature even of Brando's Kurtz. He undoubtedly is Milius's best creation, but his murderous madness belongs more to the absurd vision of Heller's *Catch 22* than to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Without the presence of the other forms and tones of insanity that permeate *Apocalypse Now*, Kilgore would trivialize the conception of the war. But as one strain of the orchestrated madness, he makes a brilliant contribution.

Although the sequence with the boat people has moral dynamics similar to those of the helicopter attack, its tone is more tragic. Since it is stripped of all flashy pyrotechnics we are able to observe the issues at closer range. At first we sympathize with Willard, who relentlessly wants to pursue his mission, rather than with Chief, who insists on searching the boat. Once the Americans begin the search, we share their tension and edginess—especially since we've all been trained by the same war movies (and earlier sequences in this one) to expect the unexpected. When the young black soldier panics and begins shooting, we aren't sure of anything—except that the boat people are dead. Then we discover the cause—a cute little puppy, whom the Vietnamese woman was trying to save and whom Lance now mercifully or sentimentally clutches to his breast. When Chief discovers that the young woman is still alive, he wants to save her. But she raises the same issue as the dog. Would taking her to a field hospital be an act of mercy, or the indulgence of a sentimental fantasy? We never know, for Willard shoots her dead. We share the boat crew's hatred of Willard, until he justifies himself in the narration: "We cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a band-aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of it, the more I hated lies." Yet we're still unsure whether Willard's act was an efficient mercy-killing or callous cruelty to serve his own ends. We don't really know who is most to blame for this horrible incident—just as we were unable to tell in the My Lai massacre. In this scene the only thing we do know is that several innocent Vietnamese have been murdered by American soldiers. Scenes like these refute those critics who claim that *Apocalypse Now* is as racist as *The Deer Hunter*.

Despite its colossal scope and its great variety of tones, *Apocalypse Now* is claustrophobic—for it restricts us to Vietnam, to the war, to the madness, to the nightmare vision, and to the obsessive consciousness of its anti-hero. It is precisely because this claustrophobic pressure is so intense and the building of the momentum so powerful that some of the slower, more symbolic scenes at Kurtz's compound don't work—they temporarily slacken the pace and relieve the pressure on the audience. Despite these flaws, Coppola is masterful in using all the resources of his medium to create an intense experience of unrelieved madness and horror, and courageous in trying to tell the story of the Vietnam war. The film creates a no-exit trap not only for its audience, but also for its protagonist and its creator, who are all left echoing Kurtz's dying words of judgment and searching for a meaningful ending that will put the war behind us all.

NOTES

1. "We talked about how the film was a parallel for the very things that Francis was living out this year. How he had been Willard setting off on his mission to make a film and how he had turned into Kurtz for a while." *Notes*, p. 211.
2. For an informative discussion of the differences between the original Milius script and the Coppola film, see Brooks Riley's "Heart Transplant," *Film Comment*, (Sept. Oct. 1979), 26-27.
3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: New American Library, 1950), p. 95. All further references to this work will be noted in the text.
4. Many of the ideas in the following paragraph grew out of conversations with Beverle Houston and Leah Appet, to whom I am indebted for several valuable insights on this issue.
5. In Conrad's story, it is Marlow who is explicitly identified with Buddha. "Lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower." (p. 69) "Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha." (p. 157)

PETER McINERNEY

Apocalypse Then: Hollywood Looks Back at Vietnam

During the last two years, eight major films about American participation in the Vietnam War have been released. Five other films which envision the war as a somewhat secondary or supplemental dramatic action have also been distributed. The trend among major films dealing deliberately with the war as a continuous or deep structure (though the result may be oblique) began in fall 1977 with Universal's release of *Heroes*, a love story set along interstate highways instead of in Harvard Yard, starring Henry Winkler as a madcap Vietnam veteran and Sally Field as the girl he gets in the end. It was followed early in 1978 by Columbia's *The Boys in Company C*, a Marine training and combat film with a mostly young cast directed by Sidney Furie, and written by Furie and Rick Natkin. Among the recent films it is the first, and one of only three, to concentrate on the fighting in Vietnam, though in this case only parodically. Late that winter American International's *Rolling Thunder* appeared, an important and subtle film directed by John Flynn that deploys Paul Schrader's version of Peckinpah's aesthetic of gut-wrenching violence. It concerns a POW pilot, played by William DeVane, who returns home to San Antonio only to find a different prison and more war. United Artists released two glossier Vietnam films. In the spring of 1978 *Coming Home* starred Jane Fonda, Jon Voight, and Bruce Dern. Only Dern's Oscar nomination did not result in an award. With a rock and roll sound track keyed to the film's plot, *Coming Home* combines a marriage melodrama, a disabled vet's adjustment, and a love triangle—making it a Vietnam version of *The Best Years of Our Lives.* That summer UA's *Who'll Stop the Rain* starred Nick Nolte, Tuesday Weld, and Michael Moriarty, exchanging the title of Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, the novel on which it is based, for the title of the rock song by Credence Clearwater Revival reprised in the film. *Who'll Stop* devotes itself to the action and pursuit sequences in Stone's story of heroin smuggling from Saigon to Oakland, but still sustains *Dog Soldier*'s thesis that the war in Vietnam caused and was caused by a depraved American society. Avco Embassy released (with negligible promotion, and during the New York newspaper strike of early fall) Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans*, starring Burt Lancaster and adapted from Daniel Ford's excellent 1967 combat novel, *Incident at Muc Wa.* Set during the smaller scale military effort of 1964, it is a tough minded, accurate, and unpretentious story about an American platoon and Vietnamese mercenaries overrun by the Vietnamese enemy on the site of a similar French disaster.

Go Tell the Spartan's unforgivable neglect by its distributor prevented many from seeing it, and its sudden disappearance signalled a lull in the Vietnam trend. Throughout the rest of 1978 audiences waited for publicity to surge around the release of two great film "events," complete with advanced mail order ticket purchasing. Newspaper coupons had to be filled out to obtain seats for the first-run showings of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter.* EMI/Universal's shrewd marketing strategy was imitated by United Artists to help recover costs incurred by Francis Ford Coppola's direction and co-production of *Apocalypse Now*, finally released in late summer, 1979. Swollen by notoriety, and with no other Vietnam films on the way soon, these two mark a crescendo for the Vietnam trend. Inspired by James Fenimore Cooper's 1841 novel *The Deerslayer, The Deer Hunter* is a story of three young working men who enlist to fight in Vietnam in 1968, serve there circa 1970, and return—except for Nick, who stays until and dies during the fall of Saigon in 1973. Robert DeNiro plays Michael, who survives in a killing zone that cripples Steve, played by John Savage, and destroys Nick, played by Christopher Walken. Joseph Conrad's turn of the century

Heart of Darkness furnishes the underlying structure for *Apocalypse Now*, written by John Milius and then revised by Coppola. With Martin Sheen as a Vietnam Marlow named Willard, and Marlon Brando as a Vietnam Kurtz named Kurtz, *Apocalypse* shows us Willard's upriver trip from his own drunken Saigon nightmares to the waking genocidal madness of Kurtz in Cambodia, a renegade Colonel Willard assassinates. "The End," The Doors's song sung by Jim Morrison which still rattles the spines of veterans and formerly draft-age avoidees, is paired with Wagner to make *Apocalypse*'s hallucinogenic pictures speak.

These eight films certify the conclusion that there is a Vietnam genre—an heterogenous group of films united uneasily by the shared purpose of representing, in varying styles, America's experience of its longest conflict and its most bitter cultural crisis since the Civil War. (We can make this claim, I do so here, without close regard to the so-called Vietnam war allegories like *The Wild Bunch, Little Big Man*, or *Dirty Harry*, which require separate discussion). Our sense of this genre is enhanced by five films which trade on it, also released during the last two years. Each develops images, servicemen characters, and themes infused with the energy and tension of the war. John Milius's *Big Wednesday* is a surfing film whose protagonists embark from the cheaper thrills of California beaches to the hippie-free southeast Asian quagmire. The re-release of Henry Jaglom's *Tracks*, a spacy account of Dennis Hopper as an Army sergeant escorting his buddy's body home on a train, failed to secure an area of operations in a popular culture more curious about Vietnam. Milos Forman's *Hair*, adapted by Michael Weller from the musical, made the serviceman Claude, played by *The Deer Hunter*'s John Savage, as important as the play's yippie Berger. *Dulce et decorum est:* Berger takes Claude's place in the C-130's troop line bound for Vietnam, and ends up with a military grave. Peter Bogdanovich played it cool as a CIA agent who sets up a Singapore whoremaster portrayed by Ben Gazzara in Bogdanovich's *Saint Jack*, adapted from Paul Theroux's 1973 novel. Gazzara's brothel is a sex-package R & R resort that thrives, "fattening them up for the slaughter," Jack saintly complains, until the war winds down. B. W. L. Norton's *More American Graffiti*, the latest film ancillary to the Vietnam genre, evidenced its bankability. Charles Martin Smith's performance as a fire-base enlisted man who deserts has running time equal with that of a drag racer, a groupie, and an insurance salesman. In *More Graffiti*, as in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, the whine-thud soundtrack and dizzying helicopter perspectives supply ersatz dramatic excitement.

This emerging phenomenon of films about the Vietnam War—nearly twelve years after the Tet offensive of 1968 and more than six years after the official American withdrawal of 1973—raises several questions. Why are major studios willing to produce such films now, after a long moratorium? What narrative strategies have been developed to avoid alienating audiences drawn from a society split by the war? And if films accept the burden and license of tools for conviviality, if they are mass therapies for industrial persons, what do the eight major Vietnam films tell us about the war or about American society and culture of the Vietnam era?

It is clear that these films are another instance of the industry's proclivity for creating commercially cross-referenced genres. Though the Vietnam genre was at the outset of 1977 "like a crapshoot," as Robert Lindsey of *The New York Times* puts it, it has proven to be friendly terrain. Yet Hollywood's reluctance to go ahead with Furie's *Boys in Company C* early in the seventies, or Schrader's *Rolling Thunder* in 1974, suggests that the genre's exploitation had been deferred. Some of the reasons for hesitation are obvious, especially concerning Furie's and Schrader's films, conceived with then-contemporary headlines in mind. A war that traumatized and divided American society was not a logical topic for popular entertainment. How could films succeed which reminded audiences of military stalemate if not outright defeat, generated guilt about suffering inflicted on Vietnamese and Americans, or caused bandaged cultural wounds to bleed afresh? Certainly these anxieties were at work, and all of the recent films have had to avoid frontal assaults on them.

But there are other reasons for the cinematic block of the past decade which are more funda-

mental. How do we understand the more or less blank space between the professedly propagandistic prowar film *The Green Berets* of 1968, and the parodic, antiwar *Boys in Company C* of 1978? Traditionally, Hollywood war films have served the goals of national policy makers and promoted mobilization and patriotism during wartime. Frank Capra's World War II series "Why We Fight" for the United States government was designed to explain war aims and to stimulate support for the war effort. Other wartime films—*Casablanca, Guadalcanal Diary, Bataan*—glorified participation. And postwar films such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and *The Longest Day* could be complacent about motives and destiny. But that was a very different kind of war. In 1967 John Wayne directed and starred in *The Green Berets* according to the conventions of these World War II films. He trotted out a fable of motives for American involvement in Vietnam which merely updated attitudes a quarter-century old. But when *The Green Berets* was released in June 1968, after the Khe Sanh siege had ended anticlimactically, after the Tet offensive demonstrated the failure of the American war of attrition, and with domestic protest against the war mounting, the work seemed to many an anachronism which jeopardized the war film itself. *The New York Times* ran two review articles, one of which pointed to strategic absurdities, and the other to "the end of the traditional war pictures and a tremendous breakdown in the fantasy-making apparatus in this country." For a generation which went to Vietnam, like memoirists Ron Kovic and Philip Caputo, nurtured on television broadcasts of Wayne's Marine Corps heroics in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, the Hollywood myth of warfare was fragged by events in Vietnam. In the words of a character in Tom Suddick's brilliant brief novel *A Few Good Men*, "John Wayne-ing it" was as versatile—and empty—an expression as "fuck."

The Green Berets demonstrated that Hollywood war film formulas were exploded by the Vietnam war. As Dalton Trumbo remarked in 1971, "a war movie in the sense . . . of battle fury" was "innately absurd" because it would have to adopt "a Hanoi point of view" and show "them going over the hilltop to get us." The United States Information Agency came to a similar conclusion

Marines under attack at an athletic contest in THE BOYS IN COMPANY C

that year concerning its "documentary" *Vietnam! Vietnam!*, whose production was supervised by John Ford. USIA Director Frank Shakespeare delayed release of the film, which had taken four years to compile, because "the changing military and political situation in Vietnam, as well as domestic political considerations, now raised doubts on the film's value as convincing and effective propaganda." The Vietnam war has never been susceptible to traditional Hollywood treatment. The industry didn't know how to be prowar when we seemed to be neither winning nor right. And it didn't dare to be antiwar, except tentatively (Michael Douglas's *Hail, Hero* [1969] and *Summertree* [1971]), or by inference and indirection: *M*A*S*H* was about the Korean War and *Catch-22* about World War II. Documentary antiwar films like *In the Year of the Pig, Winter Soldier*, or especially *Hearts and Minds* (whose release Columbia stalled), were outside productions. The film industry has had to wait until prowar propaganda is irrelevant and antiwar sentiment is historical to make Vietnam films.

The Green Berets was the only major combat film about the Vietnam war released while Americans fought, and some movie-goers think of it as a lonely precedent for the current trend. But if it is unique, it isn't the only example. Julian Smith's idiosyncratic *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* documents over twenty films, mostly second features, half of which appeared before Wayne's. These range from *Saigon* (1948) with Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake to Marshall Thompson's *A Yank in Vietnam* (1964) and *To the Shores of Hell* (1965). The second half of this history in-

cludes an homogenous group. *The Born Losers* (1967) with Tom Laughlin showed the way for post-*Green Berets* treatments by using a returned Vietvet as a prop for a biker saga. This approach is typical, and includes films like *Angels from Hell* (1968), *Chrome and Hot Leather, The Hard Ride* (1971), and *Welcome Home, Soldier Boy* (1972), which substitutes a black Cadillac for motorcycles. Each of these focuses on veterans rather than soldiers engaged in combat, and brings the war home. But there are two different sorts. In *Angels, Chrome,* and *Welcome Home,* the Vietvet is unstable, vicious, and outcast, but also a victim of a hypocritical silent majority. This type is summarized in *Death Dream* (1972), a fascinating, plausible vision of the Vietvet as avenging vampire, and appears later in the psychopaths of *Taxi Driver* and *Black Sunday.* In *Born Losers*, the sequel *Billy Jack*, and *The Hard Ride*, the vet is outcast too, but he's noble, and identifies corruption and viciousness in society. This type of the benign veteran, and the less leftist view of the war it connotes, is now in vogue. It appears in some form in half the recent films, often with the madman-victim vet as foil.

These films comprise the immediate tradition of the Vietnam genre reopened for revision. *Heroes, Rolling Thunder, Coming Home,* and *Who'll Stop the Rain* are about Americans returned to "the world," with much of *The Deer Hunter*'s third section about Michael's adjustment to Clairton. But only four of the eight films are veterans' stories: *Boys in Company C, Go Tell the Spartans*, and *Apocalypse Now* are throughout combat films, while *The Deer Hunter*'s trilogy structure devotes its second part to a firefight, the prison, and Saigon. The returned-veterans plot marks four of the first five releases, and is in line with benign-veterans films made after *The Green Berets.* The presence of combat films—the first since *The Green Berets*—is a sign of a new evolution in the genre.

Previous veterans films showed the Vietvet as devil or saint, but each insisted he was damned. Jack Dunne of *Heroes* is neither, and though damned he's redeemed. As with the other new films, the message of *Heroes* is not prowar chest-thumping or antiwar keening but reconciliation. Its Vietvet protagonist Jack Dunne begins as a really maddened young man, according to the now-exhausted stereotypes of *Taxi Driver*'s cabby Travis Bickel and *Black Sunday*'s blimpist Michael Lander. But Dunne is madcapped as well as mad, and his comic antics are an innovation among unrelievedly solemn veterans films. Comedy, and the transformation of madness into tears, are important sources of *Heroes'* difference.

The means to reconciliation in *Heroes* is its simple plot. Dunne escapes from a New York psychiatric hospital veterans' ward and travels by bus and car across America from east to west, organizing a morbid worm farm enterprise. On

HEROES: *Jack Dunne (Henry Winkler) and Carol Bell (Sally Field)*

the bus trip Dunne pursues Carol Bell, a reluctant bride-to-be. Their love affair finally blossoms, but not until Dunne acknowledges the death of a combat friend, Larry Munro. Arrived at Eureka, by hotrod and hitchhike, Dunne can go westward no further. Like Whitman's Adam facing west from California's shores, Dunne must look back and in. He visits Munro's parents, and the father tells Dunne his son is food for worms: "I buried him. . . . Who are you?" Dunne confronts the truth that the buddy who saved his life sacrificed his own. This challenge converts an ordinary suburban street scene into the landscape of a paddy firefight where Munro was killed. A sharp vignette of the war, this flashback is a psychological height. It leaves Dunne exhausted but purged, because it exorcises what Robert Jay Lifton in *Home from the War: Veterans after Vietnam* calls "survivor-guilt." Carol moves to help Dunne recover, and her response reminds us that *Heroes* is less a war story than a love story. Jack Dunne is the first joke-cracking Vietvet who not only gets over the war but also gets the girl.

Sally Field's characterization of Carol's response is a paradigm for the audience's. If *Heroes* is neither a comic masterpiece or a dramatic triumph, it is a shrewd and successful film. Director Jeremy Paul Kagan knows that one way out of the various impasses which have obstructed cinematic treatment of the war is to minimize representations of it, and to emphasize a successful love affair between two unoffending television series faces, couched in breezy dialogue and cute, slapstick comedy. But *Heroes* is not a frivolous film. Beyond these marketable characteristics is the first resolution of Vietnam trauma we've seen. And it is, in Emerson's sense, designed and offered as a representatively American model. Dunne's pioneering, Whitmanian pilgrimage from New York City, through bus stations, a turnpike diner, the Missouri heartland, and southwestern deserts of the spirit to the golden California coast carries all America with him. And we are willing to go, because there are no booby traps—no vampires or blimps—and there is nothing to argue about. "Carry on my wayward son/" is the epilogue from the odd rock song by Kansas, "There'll be peace when you are done,/Lay your weary head to rest,/Don't you cry no more." Instead of recrimination from us, this Vietvet gets compassion.

Sympathy for a bedeviled veteran, a love affair, adjustment for him and therapy for Americans: a Vietvet film formula? These amount to ingredients, but each of the veterans films mixes them distinctly. *Heroes* enables us to accept the Vietnam war as a dramatic texture by ignoring politics and ideologies—moral or otherwise—and by encouraging us to laugh a lot. But laughter is dispensable: *Rolling Thunder* is not a comedy. Instead it is the story of a Vietvet, formerly a POW pilot in Hoa Lo, the "hell-hole" Hanoi Hilton, who ends up shotgunning murdering bandits in a Mexican whorehouse. And political blindness is unnecessary: Major Rane is situated squarely in red-white-and-blue San Antonio. But despite its tone of high seriousness, and its sympathy for Rane's milieu and heroism, and of course despite the gruesome violence we expect from Schrader, *Rolling Thunder* allies the whole audience with at least two of its three veterans.

Greeted at the airport on his arrival in San Antonio, Rane makes a speech protesting that his seven years' imprisonment has made him a better man, a better officer, and a better American. This declaration tests the audience as the film unfolds. Is he a better man, or a monster? Later the community grants him celebrity, money, a red Cadillac convertible, and a sexy blonde named Linda. Like the community, we imagine this will pay him off. But Rane's wife has replaced him with a man who stayed home, his son looks at him as if he were a zombie, and the Air Force tries to retire him. Love, family, and patriotic service for their defense—the values Rane bombed and suffered for—have been dislocated. Rane feels this dislocation when he returns home for the film's crucial scene. A gang of Texan and Mexican bandits bust in after watching him accept his hollow honors on television: the media and the chamber of commerce have set him up. As they beat him, we are shown black-and-white flashbacks to Rane's prison torture, and recognize his house is a domestic version of Hanoi's hell-hole. Did America set Rane up in Vietnam?

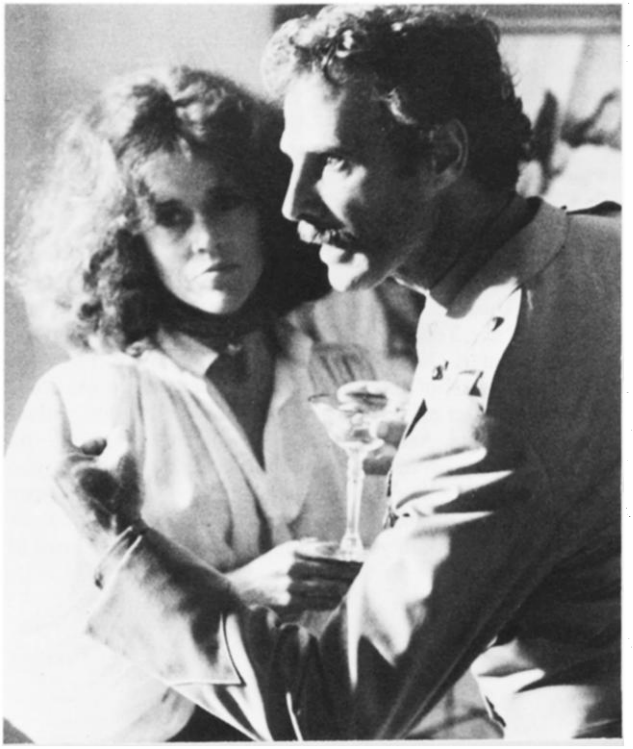
Luke Askew, who played the slow-witted Sergeant Provo in *The Green Berets,* is a hard, mean,

bandit vet named Automatic Slim. Slim is Provo's ironic, opposite number here, and as he goes to work on Rane, he argues that heroism in Vietnam was hypocrisy. Then Slim and his associates grind off one of Rane's hands in the garbage disposal. This adversary relationship between two veterans had never been focused in a film before. And while it opens two positions toward service in the war, it is a further suggestion that Rane has been duped. Suddenly Rane's wife enters with their son Mark. She confirms Slim's attitude, the son scurries off to show the robbers where the money is hidden, and Slim sums up: "You dumb asshole, how does it feel to have gone through all this shit for nothin'?" We are positioned in shadow behind Rane, and see his wife, his son, a fellow-vet, and the microcosmic bandit society arrayed against him, silently mocking the almost castrated hero. The bandits shoot the wife and son, then fire at Rane. The screen fills with darkness.

This much of the plot would serve an earlier mood. But Rane survives, resurrected, and we welcome his crusade of revenge. When with fellow-vet Johnny Vohden Rane guns down his torturers in a whorehouse firefight (like Bickel wiping out the pimping scum in *Taxi Driver*), we can't resist cheering. In *Rolling Thunder* any complicity for servicemen's suffering which may be due to Americans is ingeniously displaced and expiated. The bandits deserve what they get, Rane has earned the right to give it to them, and we feel righteous satisfaction. But those bandits are really nightmare exaggerations of ourselves. Their treatment of Rane is a metaphor for our subtle hatred of those who served us in Vietnam. Rane's domestic war against the criminals who tortured him is a war against his war sponsors, and the film's climactic frames point the gun at us. *Rolling Thunder* is the most daring, disturbing film among the recent Vietvet releases. Like the Calvinist Jonathan Edwards, Schrader offers reconciliation if we convict ourselves of sin.

Such a conclusion requires a hard reading, but meaning is available in *Rolling Thunder. Coming Home* is vacant of homily or thesis. Like *The Best Years of Our Lives, Coming Home* is about the impact of war on men's lives. But there is no happy home, no marriage or impending engagement at the end, and these concellations of *The Best Years'* logic comment on the distance the Vietnam war made us travel from it. The war behind *Coming Home* is a waste, service in Vietnam a moral error, and nothing really turns out all right in the end. In other words, *Coming Home* reminds us that the Vietnam years were the worst of our lives. But it doesn't blame the audience for that, and tries to make the best of them. This purpose is epitomized by the film's love triangle. When Bob Hyde returns from combat duty he learns his wife Sally is having an affair with paraplegic vet Luke Martin. Outraged that he has been cuckolded—both by the faithless war he abandoned and the wife who has changed—Hyde menaces Sally and Luke with a weapon and fixed bayonet. The contrast between Dern's savage, erect Marine officer and Voight's pacific, wheelchair-bound longhair hypostatizes the tension between the violent and temperate veterans of the genre. Through Sally, who has nursed Luke and offers to cure Bob, there is an at least tentative resolution of this archetypal conflict. She opens her arms to each man.

Sally's willingness to love them both is an invitation to us to do so. But such a formula is misleading if it suggests polemic. There isn't an idea



Jane Fonda and Bruce Dern: COMING HOME ▶

of any kind in the film, and this is a main reason for its success. Sally has only to learn to feel, then to choose not to choose between the devil and the saint. This uncontentious quality of *Coming Home*, its refusal to censure, is reflected by the film's uncertain conclusion. When Hyde strips off his wedding band and uniform and swims in the ocean, is he purifying himself or committing suicide? We know that Hyde managed to shoot himself and thereby gained an "easy out" from the war. Similarly, the undetermined disposition of his character is a symptom of the film's effort to find an easy out from the hard choices which infect all stories about Vietnam. Vietvet memoirist Ron Kovic, perhaps conscious that Al Pacino was negotiating to do his wheelchair story (a project since dropped), claimed that he didn't know of any vets "who committed suicide by going skinny-dipping in the ocean." We may not share Kovic's specific petulance, but it is reasonable to feel cheated, as some felt later by *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. But there may be a mimetic integrity in this uncertain ending we should appreciate. For like the war itself, *Coming Home* is a powerful drama which ends ambiguously, an experience which is hard to figure out.

In *Who'll Stop the Rain*, the last of the veterans films, moral ambiguity is a license for casuistry. As the credits fade, ominous music and swirling blackness yield to a panorama of an American outpost in action, then the screen fills with the fire of napalm canisters accidentally dropped by an American Phantom. John Converse, a hack journalist played by Michael Moriarty, stumbles in slow motion on the scorched mudhill, where bodies with leaking heads are stacked among the burning ashes of men and their murderous equipment. This first, deliberate scene is designed to establish Converse's sense of the war as a surrealistic inferno. Vietnam, Converse decides, with its weird death and spooky evil and pure heroin is Satan's kingdom, and he is helpless against it. The fruit of Converse's paranoid metaphysic, this observation sanctions the smuggling arrangement he makes with Ray Hicks (Nick Nolte), a veteran who has thumbed his nose at the war. The intrigue departs Vietnam to represent the bad apocalyptic weather of America, and to visit the heroin plague upon it.

Like those of the novel, all the events in the film are allegorical, and each of them demonstrates the operation of Converse's corrupted values in American life. The heroin is an historically apt and symbolic poison, a metaphor for the cultural disease America contracted in Vietnam. Hick's fatal defense of it against criminal narcotics agents on the grounds of a burned-out commune stages a Vietnam-style firefight that brings the war home to an absolutely ironized America. These elements are part of an extensive vision of American self-destruction augured by the film's beginning. Even the film's denuded adaptation manages to convey *Dog Soldiers'* persuasive location of the American war's deeper causes not along the 17th parallel, but everywhere in American institutions and culture. Though the vision will not soothe us, we feel we have made a flagellant's witness to it. And to the degree we do so, the film's story of the war as America's fix of violence chastens and subdues a grief too deep for tears.

Is there a set of shared characteristics among these veterans films which reflect a consensus among screenwriters and directors about how to bring the boys home? Though each selects a different perspective, all agree in a perfunctory way that the war was a nightmare for individuals and a collective hell for the nation. But this is trade the market won't bear long, and the war's impact is not allowed to steal the show. Hollywood hasn't been Vietnamized: these films have Hollywoodized Vietnam by turning actual soldiers' postwar experiences—generally known to be often pathetic—into suspenseful courtships and heroic journeys of total rehabilitation. The love affairs in *Heroes* and

John Converse and Michael Moriarty: WHO'LL STOP THE RAIN? ▶

Coming Home swamp those films, and the ones in *Rolling Thunder* and *Who'll Stop the Rain* threaten to. The terrestrial and psychic odysseys of all the veteran protagonists are Homeric quests. Thus these four films import the topics of love and heroism which may make war worthwhile, but ignore the Vietnam war which usually denied these rewards to its real veterans. However, these films should be seen as a stage in our culture's consciousness of the neurotic war we fought. They mark—or rather create—our passage from terrified, guilt-ridden fantasies of the Vietvet as an outrageous prodigal to benevolent, grudging acknowledgement that he is a man one knows, a relative or neighbor. If the recent Vietvet films don't bring the typical demobilized soldier home, at least they urge us to rescue the millions who went to the war from exile in a wilderness of pain.

The four combat films also aspire to reconciliation, and repatriate the war by identifying its Americanness. The Vietnam scenery and the Vietnamese are strange, but the men in olive green in the rice paddies are the boys next door. The melting-pot convention of aligning a variety of American types serves to familiarize our imaginations with events we've never understood. *Boys in Company C* assembles everyone from the Brooklyn punk to the southern cracker, and *Go Tell the Spartans* reads us the dossiers of each of its characters. *The Deer Hunter* develops an elaborate before-and-after context for its soldiers' war, while *Apocalypse Now* assigns us among the patrol boat crew and provides classified information about Brando's Kurtz. But among these films only *Go Tell the Spartans* avoids a cartoonist's vision. It earns its integrity as a legitimate Vietnam combat film by cutting through the immature caricature *Boys in Company C* deploys, and by steering clear of the labored symbolism of *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. In keeping with the ironies and frustrations which plagued us during the Vietnam era, it is poetic justice that *Go Tell the Spartans* is a furtive film, the least seen of all.

Like *Heroes*, the film it followed, *Boys in Company C* is buoyed by slapstick laughs, but unlike *Heroes*, it professes not to hide the war. Based on a screenplay that had circulated since 1971, *Boys* is an antiwar anachronism whose main effect is to make you want to burn your draft card. Along the lines of *Battle Cry*, *Boys* begins as a traditional war picture about kids made into men by the Marines. What the bald recruits don't know, Furie insists, is that they are being led off like sheep to the Asian slaughterhouse. Stretching ponderously from June 1967 to January 1968, the in-country plot covers the period of most intense combat, and concludes with the Company's disciplinary transfer to Khe Sanh on the eve of the inconclusive, diversionary siege. In between the basic training segment and this off-camera climax, a sequence of base camp and patrol episodes are strung together to demonstrate the incompetence and immorality of American military leadership.

Boys in Company C is an upside-down version of *The Green Berets*. Wayne's soldiers can do nothing wrong, Furie's nothing right. Wayne's America and its military establishment are noble, professionally skilled, and dedicated to a *mission civilizatrice*. Furie's America is a breeding ground for imperialism, racism, corruption, and death. In *Boys* involuntary auto-parody, epitomized by the *M*A*S*H*-derived soccer contest between Marines and Phillipine South Vietnamese, constantly rots away the film's credibility. A soccer-playing company of hillbilly and street-punk Marines is not an instrument of art but a sign of empty absurdity. Both *Green Berets* and *Boys in Company C* illustrate the principle that propaganda in art usually betrays the propagandizer. If Wayne's patriotism makes us want to be traitors, Furie's pacifism makes us want to enlist. *The Green Berets'* jingoism did little to provide American audiences with a sound understanding of the war while it was being fought. *Boys in Company C*'s antiwar activism after the fact does nothing to put the war that has ended in coherent perspective. The motives and circumstances of American involvement have always been difficult enough to understand without the addition of cheap piety and distorted fictions.

Precisely because it recognizes the dramatic values of the stranger-than-fiction facts of the American experience in Vietnam, Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans* entertains and enlightens us. In part this is because the film has a deeper sense of history than many American planners had, and because it appreciates the war's baffling complexity. Much of the credit is due to Daniel Ford,

whose novel pierces sentimentality and bravado and searches for meaning without preconceptions. And Wendell Mayes's screenplay respects this achievement. Burt Lancaster's character, the protagonist Major Asa Barker, is "a hard-case professional," and so is director Post. These four men have cooperated to create a story that feels true and looks real.

The initial scene is Barker's dusty headquarters, an undistinguished place we hover over and land on as if in a helicopter. Water-torture of a Vietcong suspect is being conducted by Cowboy, a Vietnamese scout and interpreter for the American side. The film's prologue—a concise summary of Occidental engagement from the 1954 defeat of the French to the 1964 American entrance—has set up this scene as an ordinary actuality rather than an aberration. Barker stops it, but as the film unfolds we are made to face its brutal logic. In the same poised manner the story of Barker and the destruction of his command at Muc Wa dispassionately records circumstances and consequence without pretense, entangling us in the web of history and violence that trapped the best and brightest of an era.

The action shifts back and forth from Barker's compound to the newly established garrison at Muc Wa, where burned-out American cases and Vietnamese mercenaries set up operations at the abandoned French fort. Nearby a French cemetery on a hill overlooks the scene. On the arch above the entrance is written "Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by,/That here, obedient to their laws, we lie"—a fragment of Simonides composed about Thermopylae, which gives the film its title and mood. *Go Tell* is a prophetic elegy for the American commitment, an epitaph for an enterprise which would take a decade more to expire. We witness Muc Wa's successful defense by the Americans and Vietnamese the first night, temporarily exulting with the ticket-punching Captain in the American success. But the lesson of the land and the fate of the West in Vietnam is thrust upon us by the next night's battle, when the enemy wrests the camp away, and Barker is killed. As he is fatally wounded and surrounded without hope of escape, the camera tightens on Lancaster's worn face; he utters an eloquent "Ah, shit" and dies.

GO TELL THE SPARTANS ▶

Burt Lancaster in GO TELL THE SPARTANS

No Puff the Magic Dragon flies in to gun down the enemy as it does when Wayne and company hurry away from their overrun outpost in *Green Berets*, with Wayne wheezing "We'll be back tomorrow . . . God willin', . . . and the river don't rise." *Go Tell the Spartans* is militarily the right way to make *The Green Berets*, whose outpost defense plot it resembles. The strategic absurdities Charles Mohr identified in his *New York Times* review of *Berets* are not present here. And *Go Tell* is emotionally the right way to make *Boys in Company C.* Craig Wasson's hippie grunt-protestor in *Boys* is a stereotype, linked in counterpoint to his believable character in *Go Tell* as a draftee hero who learns "It's their war." This experience of Wasson's Corporal Courcey is a surrogate for our own. *Go Tell* is the only combat film to show us a war that really was. We can see it with compassion and respect for the American soldiers, and feel the same things for ourselves, because it proves Vietnam was not our war at all.

The last two and most recent releases, the extended epic *The Deer Hunter* and the briefer epic *Apocalypse Now*, hold to the pattern of emphasizing American perceptions of American experience. Like those who counsel us not to grieve

over withered ideals or possible moral catastrophe, *The Deer Hunter* suggests that the war was a colossal fraud perpetrated by corrupt Vietnamese, and that we were its then well intentioned but now wiser victims. Like those apologists who say we would have won, given nonhypocritical license to carry the enemy's brutal fight back against them, *Apocalypse Now* argues that we covered up and emasculated the savagery that made us savage. Neither film strives for antiwar moralizing, which would have required some understanding of and commitment to the enemy's nationalist revolution —a revolution inspired partly, it might be said, by the language of Jefferson's Declaration and our own eighteenth-century national liberation front. *The Deer Hunter* shocks us by saying the contradiction isn't relevant. *Apocalypse Now* awes us by saying it doesn't apply: we should have behaved as the ruthless imperial power history made us or not postured at cutting the mustard with puppet strings.

However fragmentary such characterizations of these two huge films are, they suggest something essential and something novel about them. The parameters of the American approach had been set before their release: the war was a mistake, sure, and we took our lumps, but we could not have done otherwise. As the large type of Coppola's program puts it, the war was a "moral dilemma." Therefore these films can shake off the boring constraints of penitence and at once astonish and pander to audiences, indulging themselves as they see fit. When *Deer Hunter*'s publicity brochure was stuffed in *Variety* during the winter, it crowed that the work was "one of the most controversial and important films of 1979." The hype of Francis Ford and Eleanor Coppola assured us the same was true of *Apocalypse*. By displaying what appear to be outrageously illiberal attitudes, and by marshalling grandiose mythopoeic strategies, these films risked, solicited, and achieved controversy. While their ends may be the same as the most innocuous Vietnam films, their names are consciously monstrous. After all, word of mouth is the best advertising, and gallons of ink have oiled millions of tongues.

This is especially true of *The Deer Hunter*, whose footage has been chewed by the press left to right. Does the film fit comfortably in the somewhat gerrymandered category of combat film? The argument for the classification is that the central firefight, prison camp, and Saigon episodes had to be occasioned and focused, their stark mystery reconnoitered, abruptly entered and exited, and then appraised. Of course more than two thirds—the first and last—is set in Clairton, a Vietnam-era version of Wilder's Our Town. Attention first and last is given to the flaming steel works, the communal men's tavern, and the two temples of pagan ritual in the mountains and Christian rites in the church. But in the middle is where the action is. How we see the frame determines what we think of the war.

The war at the front, beyond it, and behind is a murderous struggle for survival, epitomized by the inauthentic but dramatically effective device of Russian roulette. Across the large margins, three general points of view on it are possible. For some *The Deer Hunter* is a bittersweet symphony of male friendship, of war as a frightening but glorious adventure, amounting to a rough blessing of macho homoeroticism: *The Deer Hunter* as a men's lib picture. (Burly fraternity men now speak of "doing a DeNiro"—showing Hemingwayesque grace under pressure despite and because of the absence of other value.) For others, these qualities are present too but anathema, and the film is a racist flag-waver, deliberately and dangerously ignorant of the truth about the deaths the DeNiros caused and the damnation America earned. These sorts of positions are available, and it is the secret of the film's enormous power that they are. Thus the third general point of view: audiences Rorshach the film's frames and then see the war according to their experience and politics. Given this pliancy, the film can't be fixed, and agreement about it—like victory in Vietnam—is elusive. All that is certain for most is that *The Deer Hunter* is the most moving movie ever made about Vietnam.

Viewers who concluded *The Deer Hunter* was not about Vietnam think *Apocalypse Now* is about Francis Ford Coppola. Both views are reasonable but inadequate. In the program oration, Coppola welcomed an autobiographical reading, saying "the ideas and images" of the film (whose effects, he hopes, will be compared to the "one small step" of the first lunar landing) "began to coincide with the realities of my own life, and . . . I, like Cap-

tain Willard, ..." But it is upon this simile, and succeeding ones—"if the American audience could look at the heart of what Vietnam was really like—what it looked like and felt like . . . " —that Coppola's enterprise stands or falls. *Apocalypse Now* is *like* Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, its Kurtz *like* Conrad's and *like* Eliot's hollow men or Frazer's Fisher King. Worked out in the film, such comparisons may be brilliant and impart meaning, as is true of Milius's and Coppola's adaptation of Conrad's story, or of the use of Morrison's cosmic oedipal fantasy, "The End." They may be silly, as the bows to Dante and the meretricious displays of Eliot are. (When Brando mumbles from "Hollow Men," his voice dry and so quiet it's meaningless, he doesn't gag at Eliot's epigraph from *Heart of Darkness*—"Mistah Kurtz, he dead"). Successful or not, the program and the film assure us Coppola's project is a full blown work of heavy art. We have to grant it privileges and will a suspension of disbelief before we exact responsibility.

One can detect a fraudulent work of art about American consciousness of Vietnam if it proclaims itself a "history" and not a "story"—what Michael Herr in *Dispatches* calls "straight history" included. Both Cimino and Coppola have been castigated for using poetic fictions to describe the war, but it is the "fact-figure" representation which becomes a casualty. This issue of a mimetic impasse is captured in *Coming Home* when Sally asks Hyde to tell her what the war is "like." "*This* is *this*," Michael tells Stan in *The Deer Hunter*, "This isn't somethin' else. *This* is *this!*" But these inarticulate imprecations tell us little. All works about Vietnam are about what Vietnam was "like," about "somethin' else." Those which capably aspire to represent it accept the imperative that fictions must be used to tell the truth, though they are untrustworthy. Coppola's don't always work well. But his embrace of this fundamental insight—at least up to the time he writes his program notes—legitimizes the film.

From the outset *Apocalypse Now* insists it is about Willard's (or Willard-Coppola's) consciousness of Vietnam as psychomachia, a conflict of the soul. The slow-motion chopper rotors slicing tropical air against the jungle palms collaborate with his hotel room's ceiling fan, and with the Doors' music, to mix Willard's alcoholic reveries and the outside Vietnamese world in his mind. From then on anything goes—and does: *Apocalypse Now* is a prolonged hallucination. The Vietnam war was many wars, from big brass chess games to psyops, from helicopter assaults, long range recon patrols, and bridge defenses to night ambushes and firefights. The film's hallucination, steadied by an inauthentic and logistically absurd river journey from the South China Sea deep into Cambodia, shows us many of them. There is even a gesture at the "arclight" B-52 raids, memorialized by a downed bomber's tail section stuck in midstream. There is Robert Duvall's Colonel Kilgore and his chopper cowboys' decimation of a Vietcong village, executed to secure good surf. And there is the nervousness of the patrol boat crew's search of a sampan, which ends in a massacre of innocent Vietnamese. The river journey takes us among them, through "the asshole of the world" and up it to Colonel Kurtz's bloody temple of atrocity.

Following Conrad, *Apocalypse* teases us with sparse, ambiguous signals about Kurtz when we finally see him. But Kurtz's sketchy swan song leaves little question that he deserves "termination with extreme prejudice." As he courts his killer, Brando's mutterings confuse us about Kurtz's evolution into a dying god of death. "Who can judge him?" Dennis Hopper's wasted photographer character asks. Kurtz repeats this challenge —whether his methods are "unsound" depends. Perhaps to beard the liberal audience, the film offers a chance to consider Kurtz's conclusion that we should have imitated the enemy, who would "brilliantly" chop off the American-inoculated arms of peasants to make a point. Perhaps Kurtz was right—we didn't win the war, and "they" did. But "they" are the same ones who took these methods westward, and who are now solving their Khmer problem by halving the population of what was Kampuchea every few months. Unlike his predecessor Colby, who also was sent to kill Kurtz but who became a convert instead, Willard resists the attraction for us and sacrifices this "brilliant" American military mind. In this latest Vietnam movie, the tension in the American experience and in the American imagination between the maddened devil and the precariously sane hero is

brought to focus, then eliminated. Thus an Eliotic rain can fall on the moral wasteland of Coppola's American war in Vietnam.

Throughout the film our war seems to be Martin Sheen's war, we seem to see it as his Willard does, aghast and complacent at the same time. Sheen manages to convert Michael Herr's predictably ballsy narration into intimate observation—of himself, the war, and Kurtz. But at the Kurtz compound gory spectacle upstages the human actors. From the crucified bodies and torsoless heads to the cross-cuts between Willard's machete assassination of Kurtz and the natives' beast-butchering, we are overwhelmed with hunks of dead red flesh. Since the machine-gunning of Bonnie and Clyde, the meatshop approach to characterization seems less meaningful and more obscene. And the simultaneous orgasmic puffing of the end of "The End" here leaves little room for creative reflection. On the screen the war is over. Coppola thinks that Willard's action of hacking Kurtz apart will enable the American audience to scapegoat the tragedy of the war.

Who can judge him, the opulent Kurtz of San Francisco and the Napa Valley? If Coppola believes his film has that effect, that he has flown us to a moon of self-esteem, then for him the fictions have become facts, the story a history. But this is this, a film of what the war was like, and not that other thing that was. Coppola's conviction that his film fights the war for the first time is tantamount to that of a section of our population which, emboldened by *Capricorn One,* thinks Neil Armstrong's "one small step" was taken in a television studio. It may be that Coppola's view is blindly insightful. In a sense *Apocalypse Now* is the Vietnam war—the program boasts that during production 1,200 gallons of gasoline were consumed in 90 seconds, "50 water explosions of 35 sticks of dynamite each, 2,000 rockets, flares, tracers, and 5,000 feet of . . . ," and so on. Coppola sounds like General Westmoreland. In *Notes* Mrs. Coppola describes the telegram she sent her philandering husband, accusing him of conducting his own Vietnam war in the Phillipines. But the victory smell of all that pseudo napalm was inconstant, like Coppola himself. United Artists brought him back from the field to negotiate a treaty with his muse so he could achieve a separate peace with honor. Coppola is as much a Kurtz as a Willard, and he didn't win his war either. But *Apocalypse Now* does let us look at what the dark heart of Vietnam was really *like.*

MICHAEL TARANTINO

Tanner and Berger: The Voice Off-Screen

Pierre is a journalist who is trying to put the finishing touches on a travel article on Brazil. Paul, a writer of a different sort, is currently painting walls white for a living. When the former is offered a scriptwriting assignment, he asks his friend to collaborate with him. Complications arise when Paul is told what the subject is that he will be dealing with: a young woman, Rosemonde by name, was accused of attempting to shoot her uncle a few years ago. Their script is to be based upon that incident, a TV docudrama under the protective guise of fiction.

After being briefed, Paul comes up with a stunning explication of why Rosemonde did, indeed, try and kill her uncle. The sequence of events is quite obvious to him, and the act of setting it down on paper will be a mere formality.

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Bulle Ogier in La Salamandre: *the sausage factory*

need the facts.

As Pierre takes off to interview Rosemonde and her uncle, Paul remains behind, armed with his typewriter and his imagination. Eventually the two writers and Rosemonde find themselves together in the same house. Against his wishes, Paul comes face to face with his "would-be murderess." A massive writer's block ensues, as he is forced to admit, "She has engulfed us." (*La Salamandre*, dir. Alain Tanner, co-scenarist, John Berger, 1971)

Every film, and by extension, every "art-object," lends itself to multiple reading situations, whether the focus is formal, contextual, ideological, historical, etc. Alain Tanner's films are no exception, and, indeed, seem to invite these multi-analyses. Each film is structured to allow for the possibility of a dialectical relationship between author and reader/viewer, with the "completed" work serving as a type of ultimate synthesis. Rather than setting out to represent specific thematic points, Tanner's films seem to revolve around a collection of opposite elements, whose collective aim is to involve the subject/viewer in an act of participation. They belong to that category, proposed by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, in which "the content is not explicitly political, but in some way becomes so through the criticism practiced on it through its form."[1] While there certainly are characters in *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* or *Le Milieu du monde* who have strong and evident political concerns, the major emphasis remains on the method through which they are presented, the signifier defining the signified.

Each opposition in Tanner's films—black and white or color, montage or sequence shot, hand held or static camera, typage versus performance —elicits a response from the viewer, be it synthetic or antagonistic. As Eisenstein's theory of intellectual montage proposes a type of film/viewer relationship which approximates the mental processes of the brain, "sorting out conflicts and juxtapositions,"[2] Tanner attempts to lay bare the process, so that the viewer may reassess its basic elements.

In *La Salamandre*, the primary opposition at work is the play between objective and subjective types of knowledge. Pierre and Paul are illustrative of two approximative approaches to "truth" as they attempt to encircle Rosemonde in the course of their investigation. In effect, she is reduced to an abstraction, no longer "Rosemonde," but the key to veracity, split into conflicting layers of signification, as a jigsaw puzzle is taken apart only to be put back together again. In the prologue, a grainy, newsreel-like segment depicts a man cleaning his gun and apparently shooting himself. As he falls to the floor, we realize that there is another person in the room. The cherubic/demonic visage of Rosemonde bursts into the frame, eyeing the camera lens. As Pierre and Paul will plunge deeper and deeper into the matter of her guilt or innocence, Tanner, the voice off-screen, will pull further and further back from explanation, indicating a reluctance to swing the balance one way or another, or even to give one question precedence over another. The more time one devotes to the subject, the more "mysterious" she becomes. Revelations and assumptions are constantly reversed. At one point, Rosemonde denies even being in the room at the time of the shooting, a statement which the film viewer knows to be false. Yet, even the fact that the viewer has

this privileged knowledge of Rosemonde does not advance him/her any further towards "definition."

The figures in *La Salamandre* are revealed in the midst of exposition, a method which, in itself, resists the process of defining and characterizing people and events. There is no filling in of background. Through the use of gestures, dialogue, environment, composition, etc. Tanner works against any predilection for classification of types. In talking about the relationship between the filmmaker and the viewer, Tanner cites the rapport with an audience as the first thing that one thinks about in writing a scenario. He also talks of the importance of an "interlocutor" in this process. In the cinema, the relationship with an audience is usually a one-way street. "It goes from the screen to the viewer and that is all; it is a relationship of domination." (Tanner, as quoted in *Cinema, mort ou vif*, Zurich Filmcollective, 1977, my translation)

The concept of the "interlocutor" is a central one in any examination of Tanner's work and it leads directly to his relationship with John Berger. The latter is the English novelist and art critic who met Tanner when both were living in England during the Free Cinema movement in the mid-fifties. Tanner had made *Nice Time* with Claude Goretta, in 1956. He was later to call it a "series of impressions on Saturday night . . . what Jean Vigo called 'a point of view documentary.' "[3] After *Nice Time*, Tanner worked as an assistant producer for the BBC for a year, completing six documentaries for the series "Living With Dangers." Upon returning to Switzerland and completing two shorts and a feature-length documentary, Tanner and Berger collaborated on their first scenario in 1966, *A City at Chandigarh*. The film is an investigation into the ways in which an ancient Indian city, after being reconstructed from a design by Le Corbusier, transformed the lives of its inhabitants. Berger's narration integrates quotes from such sources as Yeats, Brecht and Rousseau along with the film's original text and mirrors the enigmatic quality of the images. Ultimately the film resides on the suspicion of that which is apparent, a suspicion which is used to expose certain underlying ramifications. In this case, the methods of the documentary would foreshadow the approach to the fictional narrative.

Thereafter, Berger would work with Tanner three times, in each instance as the co-writer of the scenario: *La Salamandre* (1971), *Le Milieu du monde* (1974), and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (1976).

In an article written to accompany the published script to *Le Milieu du monde*,[4] Tanner talks of how he and Berger approach the scenario. In the case of *La Salamandre*, the scenario had already been written, but Tanner needed someone, "an interlocutor," to "tighten the pin of the story." Before proceeding to examine the form that this collaboration took, let me turn briefly to a summary of Berger's own work in order to illustrate the proximity of aims that these texts shared with the films to follow, primarily with regard to delineating the space between text and reader.

In the United States, Berger is best known for *Ways of Seeing* (1972), an illustrated essay which was based on the BBC television series of the same name that he had co-produced. Therein, he addresses the question of the socio-political-economic overtones which attach themselves, not only to a work of art, but to the very manner in which a viewer perceives them. Thus, oil paintings are not just paintings, they are often depictions of things which are buyable and become surrogates for owning the thing itself. "If you buy a painting, you buy also the look of the thing it represents." (*Ways of Seeing*, p. 83-84) The desire to take possession of an object, to own it, becomes a function of the traditional oil painting.

I mention this particular analogy because it is so illustrative of Berger's concern with the notion of perception itself and what the artist/critic's responsibilities are with regards to presenting particular "data" to an audience. This responsibility extends to the original creator and to the analyzer of the text/object. In the literary field, its relevance applies to both fictional and nonfictional works.

Ways of Seeing is the most obvious, and accessible, example of Berger's approach to criticism, possibly due to the fact that the book's rather simplistic form was drawn from the television series and inherited many of that medium's restrictions as well as advantages. Previously, in a work entitled *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the USSR*, Berger had defined his theory of criticism as a

form of "intervention between the work of art and its public" (p. 9). His study goes on to point out the dichotomy between theory and practice in the Soviet Union today and the relativity of such a breach in the context of Soviet history. At the center of the analysis is the concept of criticism as intervention and the method of seeing the general through the particular, as opposed to any strictly phenomenological approach to art.[5]

Likewise, in his introduction to *The Look of Things* (1974), Nikos Stangos points out that, for Berger, the work of art possesses a "unique dialectical unity." There are three ways for the critic to approach the work: through the artist, through the works themselves and through the work as a "concrete manifestation of what we call man's spirit." Additionally, one must take into account the moral, social, epistomological, and political implications of the work of art.

> To Berger, all these are inherent aspects of art, inseparable one from the other, uniquely fused together in each and every work of art. The equation becomes infinitely more complex when another prime factor is taken into consideration: the viewer. (*The Look of Things*, pp. 12-13)

Thus, the making and the perception of art becomes a continuum, a basis for a philosophy of approach, filtered through the artist, the work, and the viewer. With this in mind, Berger's concerns with criticism and fiction seem perfectly compatible. His point of view attempts to close the distance between the writer as observer/audience and the writer as the object of perception, the source of the original text. When translated into fictional/narrative terms, the result is an increased perception in the role of narration itself.

To date, Berger has written four novels—*A Painter of Our Time* (1958), *The Foot of Clive* (1962), *Corker's Freedom* (1964), and *G* (1972)—all of which are concerned with, to a certain extent, the reflective use of narrative as a primary component of what is being said. Berger's approach to form is similar to Tanner's: both use it to turn the reader around in order to reduce the elements of "domination" that are taken for granted in a text/reader relationship.

A Painter of Our Time is written in the form of a diary, found by the "author," which retraces a period in the life of Janos Lavin, a Hungarian refugee living in London who has suddenly disappeared. Upon discovering the diary, his friend John tries to reconstruct the events which led up to Janos's departure, interspersing his own comments between the entries. Thus, on the one hand, the book is a first-person narrative of a particular life. On the other hand, it is a first-person investigation of that life, using the source material as a reference. In the course of this double narrative, Janos, a painter, reveals that he had questioned the ultimate value of art and of the relationship of the artist to the world, especially a Hungarian artist in London as the crisis of 1956 approaches in his native country. His moral qualms soon take precedence over the work, just as he is being "recognized" with his first show. The struggle is always to unite, to see one element reinforcing the other. His reconciliation of art and politics is, however, only temporary and illusory, for, soon after the opening of his London exhibition, he is gone. Two weeks later, he sends a letter to John, saying that it is clear what he must do. Yet, as the "original" narrator replies, no one knows what happened after that letter. "Even worse, we do not know what he did."

The narration, or point of view, in *A Painter Of Our Time* is doubly reflective and consistently shifting. Janos's diary and John's comments balance, contradict, and parallel each other, constantly referring the reader back to the speaker. There is also the obvious connection between "John" the character and "John" the author, which crystallizes rather than disguises the fact that the two entries, diary and commentary, are the creation of *one* omniscient author, rather than two fictional ones, whose knowledge is restricted. A final doubling, of course, is the similarity between "Janos" and "John," as names and as literary creations. (Berger himself was a painter before he was a writer.)

The introduction to the book serves to further reduce the boundaries between fact and fiction. The author—again, it is difficult to distinguish between "John" and John Berger—talks of the circumstances of how the book came to be written and the reservations he had of making the diary public. "Finally, I decided it was right to do so, but that, in order to complete the picture of these four years of a painter's life, it was necessary to

have also a commentary of background facts. This I have tried to write."

Certainly, the placing of a distance between reader and text by presenting an author who has found a manuscript of a narrative and takes us into his/her confidence is not a literary device unique to "modern" writers. One need only note the novels of DeFoe, Richardson, or Fielding for precedents. Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, and perhaps because of the urgency of events in Eastern Europe in the fifties, when *A Painter of Our Time* first appeared, the distinction between fact and fiction becomes almost irrelevant. The moral questions that are addressed in the preface are real ones, for both literary creation and Berger.

In one of the diary entries, Janos reflects upon the problem of a narration, once removed:

> "Michel considers my life to be tragic. I can see this in the way he reassures me—in order perhaps to reassure himself. I suppose many others might agree with him. Yet, it is not and has not been tragic. My work bears witness to that. A narrative of it all might make it seem so. That, however, is the kind of distortion which is inevitable to the narrative. It has to leave out of account all the stray, uneventful moments—just as a map leaves out of account millions of flowers. It is in these moments that one recovers; delights in the fact that one has survived so far and is critically aware without a crisis." (p. 160)

Lavin, of course, brings up a seminal characteristic of narrative when he talks of it "leaving out" events. Narrative is, almost by definition, selective. John's comments, printed after Janos's, often do fill in the "stray, uneventful moments," yet, despite their seemingly additive and expository function, they reinforce the reader's consciousness of the selectivity of the process. In a sense, Lavin is criticizing the form of the book itself. If the reader, like his friend Michel, also sees his life as tragic, it is because he/she is reading it within a particular context, in this case, reading a "private" work that was not meant to be read. John's comments make no difference—the text we are reading is distorted and incomplete.

One should not, however, conclude that the cloud that Berger spreads over his own text is merely a case of autobiographical elements predictably populating a first novel. The questioning of the form of the work—couched in moral and aesthetic terms through its characters—is an invitation to the reader to complete the dialectical process of reading. He/she must assume the role of an active critic.

From *A Painter of Our Time*, we turn our attention to *G*, Berger's most recent novel (1972), which further extends this concern with significatory devices. Writing in *The New Yorker*, George Steiner called it "a deliberate collage; it is quilted of bits of straight narrative, of philosophical maxims, of shreds of verse, of historical reporting . . . " The hero of the novel, who witnesses and reflects the turbulent era of the late 1800's in Italy, is known only as G. Like *A Painter of Our Time, G* opens by directing the reader towards the diegetic device. "The father of the principal protagonist of this book was called Umberto." By using the phrase "of this book," Berger reiterates the desire to mirror the experience of reading. As one follows the exploits of the principal character, so does he/she follow the process of setting those events down, along with the parallel detailing of data that is "peripheral" to the narrative, data that is both factual and/or metaphorical. It is difficult for the reader to be "absorbed" in *G* while the process of assimilation is proceeding in the present tense alongside the past tense narration. By dividing the book into bursts of prose, frequently from one to five lines in length, Berger fulfills a dual purpose of form and content. Not only does the way in which the language is set down approximate a particular character's thought pattern or point of view with regards to certain disparate events, it also recalls Berger as narrator and the spaces that he himself is leaping over in order to make certain inclusions.

In addition, Berger will often interrupt the narrative to inject an element of self-criticism (analysis), whether it relates to the text, the historical environment, or the narrator himself. At one point, following a series of reflections on sexuality, which, again, may issue from "character" or "author," one reads: "Why does writing about sexual experience reveal so strikingly what may be a general limitation of literature in relation to aspects of all experience?" (p. 122) After examining the question for three pages, he concludes, "I am writing about the lovers on the bed." (p. 127) and returns to the narrative, per se. Throughout, there is a reluctance on Berger's, i.e. G's, part to

take the written word for granted as signifier, especially within a narrative context. Just as the art critic may not accept events or objects in a vacuum, so the novelist must question language. To write as if all words were a priori facts is to adopt a coercive stance towards one's audience. "The horizon is the straight bottom edge of a curtain arbitrarily and suddenly lowered upon a performance." (p. 347) The last sentence in *G* returns to the naming of the selective process. If the straight bottom edge of a curtain sounds like a guillotine, the reference is not off-handed.

It is not possible, within the confines of this article, to touch on all of Berger's works. One should note, however, that the works of nonfiction reflect many of the same concerns as the novels and art criticism. *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man* are collaborations with the photographer Jean Mohr—the former on a country doctor, the latter on the subject of migrant labor in Europe. They are anything but words illustrated with pictures or vice versa. In addition to looking at both subjects through the same filters that condition fictional characters or paintings—political, economic, geographic, etc.—each work continues to question the way we interpret data, whether it be written, spoken or pictorial.

To summarize the role of the author/critic in Berger's work, one might turn to one of his critical essays, "The Success and Failure of Picasso," since the concept of intervention applies not only to the analysis, but to Picasso himself, as he is drawn for the reader. He is examined as Picasso the artist and Picasso the man, since the concepts of public image/private artist and private citizen/public artist cannot be separated. Picasso the artist, the cumulative result of the criticism he has inspired, is a reflection of what Picasso and the public have created as media image, and vice versa. He is one of the great examples in twentieth-century art of the impossibility of fixing the work of art outside of time and history.

The tragedy for Picasso, according to Berger, is the economic dictation of what subjects to paint, what is "safe," yet still "expected" of a genius. He is as famous for his wealth as his paintings. In transcending the need for money, an analogy may be made to the Midas fable. "Whatever Picasso wishes to own, he can acquire by drawing it . . . Whatever Midas touched, turned to gold. Whatever Picasso puts a line round can become his." (pp. 3-4) In the process, the work becomes static.*

Conversely, the most exhilarating "success" that Picasso achieved was in his Cubist period, a period of truly "modern" art. It is important to note the three senses in which Cubist paintings communicated this sense of modernity, for they also function as examples of "intervention": (A) Through the choice of subject, which emphasized constructed or man-made objects. Consequently, the "ordinariness" of things was emphasized—coffee cups, newspapers, ash trays, etc. "It was as though the Cubists wanted to celebrate a value never before admitted in art: the value of the manufactured." ("Success and Failure of Picasso," pp. 56-57) (B) By the materials used, i.e., those that could be found in any hardware store. Thus the Cubists "challenge the whole bourgeois concept of art as something precious, valuable, and to be prized like jewelry." In addition, the paintings argued for the right of the artist to use any means at his disposal rather than the tools he was "expected" to use. (pp. 57-58) (C) By the "way of seeing" and the attempt to "establish the physical presence of what they were representing. . . . Like Courbet, they hated the conventions that had forgotten their origins: the oil paint in love with itself." (p. 58)

The concept that was so important to the vision of the Cubists, and which encapsulates the three-pronged challenge outlined above, was process. "The Cubists created a system by which they could reveal visually the interlocking of phenomena. And thus, they created the possibility in art of revealing processes instead of static states of being. Cubism is an art entirely concerned with interaction . . . it is an art of dynamic liberation from all static categories." (pp. 59-60) Beyond simple examples of subjectivity, the paintings reflect this new way that objects and events were seen—in context and in flux. The concern with process would also extend to the audience in such a way that the manner in which the paintings were seen by the viewer would mirror their own conception.

*In this context, it is interesting to note the recent report (*NY Times*, 9/11/79) that the French government would be selecting more than 700 of Picasso's artworks, valued at $71.5 million, from his estate in payment of his inheritance taxes.

When the image of Picasso began to supercede his own work, the concept of process was slowly replaced by stasis, comfort and stagnation.

The notions of process, reflexive analysis and intervention all point towards the artwork as an open rather than a closed system. All three elements may also be noted in Tanner's films, in an attempt to maintain a dynamic sense of perception, on both sides of the screen. As mentioned above, these films rely, to a great extent, upon the relationship of opposing elements and attitudes. In addition to the first perceptive level of interaction—between various scenes and sequences —there is also an interior clash of signifiers—text, camera movement, editing, scoring, etc. Each choice of signifier is also a reminder that the opposing method has been rejected. By laying bare the various possibilities at hand, the films attempt to make the viewer aware of the forces at play and to elicit a questioning of any assumed functions of the methods by which those forces are communicated.

Although the role that Berger plays in these films is restricted to the scenario, the confluence of style between his literary output and Tanner's methods of direction is important to note. The mutual attitude towards form determines the context of the collaboration. As Berger does in his writing, Tanner insists on the role of the director as intermediary between the work and the viewer/reader. He sees a cinema which, if it really hopes to achieve an ideal called "the real" may only do so by reflecting its own artifice, thereby stressing the reality of the means of production, rather than the production of reality. An "invisible" process is a deception, in the moral and physical sense. Thus, each one of his narrative films attempts to realize a collision between the elements of a lucid, objectively comprehensible style and the concerns of an open narrative, with its subjective levels of cognition.

There is, for example, the choice of the sequence shot as opposed to a shot-counter shot relationship. In this case, the method to be questioned and reinterpreted is that of "invisible editing"—the concept that editing approximates the work of the human eye in the way it seemingly moves from one shot to another, without apparent effort, thereby approaching "the real." Tanner, however, sees it as a matter of domination rather than approximation. Such a method not only tells us what to see, but assumes that this is a natural consequence of the cinematic experience. In an interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*,[6] Tanner talks of how the classical narrative codes are situated within the decoupage, "because, above all, this technique (invisible editing) permits erasure of all traces of work." Because the camera is heavy and clumsy, unlike the human eye, the decoupage tackles the illusion of 'looking.' If we see the film frame as "an arbitrary spatial definition," then the reduction of the decoupage to the sequence shot restores the elements of artifice. To attempt to reproduce "reality" merely squares the deception factor—the reflection of a filmic reality is far more relevant.

The same concerns apply to the question of literary narration. As I mentioned earlier, Tanner has likened Berger's contribution to *La Salamandre* to that of the interlocutor, a voice between the text and the audience. This role would seem particularly well suited to a writer who is intricately concerned with the implications of narration and the role of the reader in the aesthetic dialectic. As their first collaboration on a fiction film, the structure of *La Salamandre* clearly points the way to films such as *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas*, films which assume an existence outside of their own narrative boundaries.

As far as their working methods themselves are concerned, Tanner has written extensively on the making of *Le Milieu du monde.* He had told Berger the story of the film in very broad terms. The latter then wrote some notes, in the form of letters to the two main characters, on their relationships. "These two letters would come to serve as the basis for the scenario itself."[7]

Tanner goes on to talk of how he and Berger worked together on "the characters, their motivations, their functions and their fate with regard to the interior of the story." After discussing the narrative and the chronological ordering and relationship of events, they came to deal with the techniques utilized for the narration, or rather for "deconstructing the narration." One of the tools used was a graph, along which were charted the interrelationships of the characters: line one for

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Paul and Adriana, line two for Adriana herself, line three for Paul, etc. One of the lines was for the "intervention of the authors, the commentary."

> One can see immediately the advantages of this method on the practical groundwork; the fact of having all the elements of the narrative in front of you at one time, of being able to establish the chronology and functions as well as the intermingling of the lines with each other. For example, the interventions of line four (politicians), five (garage workers), and six (cafe waitresses), which function in the film as commentaries on line one (Paul and Adriana), or the difficulties of integrating what we called line seven (nature).[8]

From this description, one can see that the emphasis on the pre-text is discontinuous and parenthetical rather than linear. At this point, Tanner worked on the dialogue by himself, "and put the structure of the film in place, just as it would be for the shooting."[9]

The use of off-screen commentary is a device which has figured prominently in each of the Tanner/Berger collaborations. For *Le Milieu du monde*, Tanner refers to it as "the voice of the authors," as "the third voice of the film . . . which precedes those of the characters to the extent where it would be able to explain what happened or where an interpretation was not possible." Again, the concept of an interlocutor comes into play in this technique, which is, by definition, reflexive. The viewer recognizes this "third voice" as being off-screen, extra-narrational, and "realistic," just as he/she recognizes the voices of Paul and Adriana as fictional, intranarrational elements. Ultimately, the commentary was "to give to the film a slightly different frame"; in other words, to redirect one's perception of it.

The willful segmentation of the narrative in *Le Milieu du monde* is the contextual equivalent of the way in which Tanner alternates elements of style. The film is formally structured upon the use of the sequence shot and the relationship between movement and stasis as elements of composition. "This film tells the story of an Italian café waitress and of an engineer from The Middle of the World over a period of 112 days." Just as Berger had delineated the course of *G* and redefined its narrative from the outset, so does the juxtaposition of fluid and static, reflexive and illusionary elements in *Le Milieu du monde* break down the components of the narrative into discrete levels of signification.

Miou-Miou and Jacques Denis: JONAS

In *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000*, the most recent collaboration of Tanner and Berger, the montage of voices takes a more centrifugal form, concentrating on the concept of parallel narrative and unity. Once again, we find that the eight tales are advanced by a succession of opposites: black-and-white/color, fantasy/reality, movement/stasis. When the eight main characters come together for the first time at the farm in the middle of the film, it is not merely a convergence of a surplus of narrative threads. It is the moment at which the combination of forms is most highly visible. The long take is used to assemble the characters; the mixture of black-and-white and color footage in the subsequent battle in the mud challenges our perception of the scene as documentation or staging; the mud sequence is edited in digest form and clashes with the rest of the film. While each formal element represents a usage of filmic language as an agent of invisibility, it also acts as a rupturing device to reflect that self-same process. In form, as well as structure of character movement, the scene at the farm reveals the film's centricity as inward, i.e. reflexively, directed.

Finally, to return once more to *La Salamandre*, one can see that the point of intervention is again a narrative disjunction, which questions the basic processes of definition and analysis. Whereas *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas* utilize various *approaches* to narrative, the one horizontal and the other centrifugal, the emphasis in *La Salamandre* is on ways of seeing in themselves, the very existence of different types of knowledge, and therefore, means of obtaining it. The subject of the

film is not so much the person being looked at—Rosemonde—as it is the viewers themselves—Pierre and Paul, each illustrative of a different "look," and acting as surrogates for an audience.

These two approaches are conditioned, as it were, by the commentary, which functions as a balance between the two, as well as a third source of information, similar in function to the way it was employed in *Le Milieu du monde.* In an interview, Tanner referred to the off-screen commentary in *La Salamandre* as corresponding to "a desire for distanciation in a film which is equally concerned with the relationship between the real and the imaginary."[10] These two poles are represented by the approaches of the two writers, fiction versus journalism. Again, the commentary is the "third voice."

The commentary has a twofold function in the film. On the one hand, it provides the viewer with factual information that is parallel, rather than perpendicular, to the film's narrative. After a scene in which Paul has gone to visit Rosemonde's uncle, there is a cut to a shot of the street, as we eventually see Paul walking towards Rosemonde's. The commentary is delivered over the scene: "On the 25th of November, that is to say, three days earlier, the foreign workers who take away our garbage suddenly went on strike. A savage strike, because it was unexpected, because it was intolerable. In effect, exterior order and propriety were being threatened." The inclusion of factual, "real" elements in the narrative, by way of this off-screen voice, is more than just a break, an autonomous segment rupturing any supposed linear movement of the film. These "headlines" from an unspecified news report are delivered over a connecting sequence in the film, a sequence that links Paul's visits with the uncle and with Rosemonde. The inclusion of the shot of him walking from one space to another, with the commentary overlaid, becomes more than a bridge between scenes. It is an example of narrative exclusions. The point is made formally, through the editing, and contextually, through the political reflection of the space in which fictional characters move.

The commentary also functions as an interior reflection of the characters' concerns, in that it comments upon their actions, and places them in a particular context, bounded by time, as if what we are seeing is the unfolding of a diary. (This method would become more precise—while at the same time remaining abstract through its minimalism—in *Le Milieu du monde.*) Following the scene in which Paul sees Rosemonde for the first time, after Pierre has brought her back to the house, there is a cut to an exterior shot. The commentary reads, "Paul had problems. Since he had met Rosemonde three days ago, everything had changed for him. The time had hardly changed but it passed. Today is the 23rd of November." Again, while referring to the unfolding of the narrative in time and to a character's thoughts within, the commentator's fixing of specific dates refers us back to the realization that a narrative unfolds in *narrative* time.

Even if one puts the off-screen voice aside for the moment, he/she is still confronted by the purposeful complexity with which the script of *La Salamandre* seems to tackle what appears to be a very simple question: did Rosemonde try to shoot her uncle or didn't she? The answer, which is precisely what Pierre and Paul start out looking for, is constantly being shrouded, revealed and/or denied by the data that is presented. Pierre and Paul's investigation parallels the experience of watching the film in that things can never be accepted just on appearances.

When Rosemonde enters the frame in the precredit sequence and turns towards the camera, it is as if she has spotted this mechanic voyeur. Yet, what has the camera actually revealed? If it is acting as an implement of knowledge for the viewer, it has failed, since we still have no clear idea whether the shot was accidental or fired in anger by the woman. In a footnote to this section of the script, Tanner writes, "This scene is filmed in such a way so that one does not understand what has happened." More often than not, one could point to this deliberate obfuscation of facts as a method used in a film which will "leak" the solution as the action develops. *La Salamandre*, however, does not move towards, but away from clarification, at least the type of clarification that one might expect from a film that seems to be about an unsolved crime.

As the writers become more and more involved, the facts, whether they are seen as "objective,"

in the case of Pierre, or "subjective," in the case of Paul, start to shift on them. After his first meeting with Rosemonde, Pierre doubts that she could have shot her uncle—a conclusion based more on his stereotypical reading of this "young girl" type than any concrete revelation she may have made to him. Then, when he goes to see the uncle, he hears a story that is remarkably similar to the one that Paul had already deduced from Rosemonde's name: she was from a very large family, a country family who could no longer afford to bring her up, and sent her to her uncle in the city. At this point, Pierre and Paul were at the same point in their inquiries, although the latter had not yet left his typewriter. When Pierre asks him, "What place does reality have in your hypothesis?" he answers, "With possibly a few exceptions, I've just been talking about reality."

Both writers are frustrated by their encounters with Rosemonde, constantly having their own doors slammed in their faces. During the night she spends at their house, she sits in Pierre's room while he is hard at work at his typewriter. She wants to talk, but he is getting annoyed—he must finish his article. His fictional character has superceded its model, if the relationship was ever that symbiotic in the first place. The process of creation has been substituted for explication.

Paul, on the other hand, after meeting Rosemonde, finds his writing is paralyzed by the introduction of this alternative approach to knowledge. Soon, he is outside, playing the journalist, interviewing the uncle, actively pursuing the subject. In the latter part of the film, after he and Pierre have taken Rosemonde to the country to visit her parents, Paul is the one who admits defeat, seeing that they have gotten too close to her. They must regain, and readapt to, a sense of distance and start again.

Indeed, after their false start, which occupies virtually the entire film, it comes as no great revelation when Rosemonde finally admits to shooting her uncle. At that point in the "investigation," it simply does not matter. Pierre and Paul had passed beyond that juncture a long time ago in trying to define her more fully. As she moves through the crowd of shoppers at the film's end—once more in slow motion—one realizes that this character cannot be defined through a mere cataloguing of her actions. Her "look"—into the camera—at the end brings the film full circle, confronting the regard that she has successfully avoided.

One of the "assumptions" often incorporated into narrative film is that a character's fiction can be separated, and even supercede, his/her essence. This is precisely what happens when Pierre regards Rosemonde's presence as an intrusion upon his fictional world. For Tanner and Berger, the presentation of this paradox is central to their conceptions of how to approach the exclusivity of narrative. The "stray, uneventful moments," the facts that are "uncapitalized," are revealed as conditioners to the actual events which form the skeleton of the narration. What Janos Lavin's diary does not reveal in *A Painter of Our Time*, the garage workers in *Le Milieu du monde, G*'s diversions on the process of writing, the "mysteriousness" of *La Salamandre*—all of these elements relocate the focus of their narratives, expanding the inclusions while indicating the incompleteness of the entire process. In the case of *La Salamandre* and *A Painter of Our Time*, the means by which this relocation takes place is remarkably similar: the use of a double narrative, each balancing and defining the other. In George Steiner's quote on *G*, the key phrase is "a *deliberate* collage." The multitude of voices in Berger's, and in Tanner's work, is the key to approaching the texts themselves. In questioning basic assumptions about filmic, literary and critical form; in using those elements as a reflection of themselves rather than as components of an invisible style; by producing works which are "in process" rather than static—Tanner and Berger represent a body of work, separately and collaboratively, which is truly "modern."

Certainly, the aim of this article is not to suggest that there is a strictly causal relationship between John Berger's books and Alain Tanner's films. The vagaries of film production prohibit such a simplistic reading. Rather, I think it is more of a complimentary relationship, centering around both artists' concern with exposing the deep structure of their works in order to open up the relationship with an audience. The primary way in

LA SALAMANDRE: *Bulle Ogier and Jean-Luc Bideau*

which the films reflect this dual concern is through the inclusion of a commentary, the additional voice which redefines what we see and hear on the screen. Just as Berger insists upon multiple levels of authorship in his novels and criticism, so Tanner has pursued the development of cinematic forms as a center of the relationship between film-maker and viewer, a relationship which is political as well as aesthetic. The figure of Rosemonde, retaining elements of "mystery," of nondefinition, as part of her fictional make-up is one that delineates the influences that Tanner and Berger have brought to bear upon her.

The two notions of the critic/writer as an agent of intervention between text/artwork and reader/viewer and the production of images and sounds as a struggle against a mode of domination are therefore very closely aligned. As Berger cites the notion of process as the key to a modern concept of art, so Tanner attempts to reflect the process of cinematic discharge. How these views are reflected in characterization and narrative is only a part of their convergence,* but the ultimate aim is still directed towards restoring the active, dialectical process to replace a consumptive one.

A more detailed analysis of *La Salamandre* would reveal many more junctures at which the emphasis upon actively seeing returns the viewer to a reflection of the processes at work: the way in which sequences are grouped or juxtaposed, providing a montage of sections rather than shots; the use of the moving camera as a bridging device; the manner in which the scenes of Rosemonde at work move from mimesis to abstraction; the function of music as a component of the entire sound track, rather than mere punctuation; variables in performance types—Bulle Ogier's intense, almost catatonic portrayal of Rosemonde, as opposed to Jean-Luc Bideau's Paul, drawn in extremely laconic strokes.

Still, the manner in which the narrative itself is inverted, along with its basic assumptions on the process of understanding, remains as the starting point for an analysis of the relationship that Tanner and Berger have enjoyed. Each artist recognizes—insists upon—seeing the film, the novel, the act of criticism as a three-leveled phenomenon. The author/film-maker cannot be removed when the work is completed to allow for its passive absorption by an audience. The inti-

*One should note here that Tanner sees *Jonas* as the end of a particular period in his career—a period marked by a reliance upon text. His sixth feature, *Messidor*, represents an even more drastic break from the notion of traditional narrative.

mate bonding between consumer and product is rejected as one that promises a false sense of security. The notion of a film or a book as a document is replaced by a work that continues to evolve because it cannot be fixed. Only when the viewer/reader acknowledges the elements at play, both formal and contextual, does the process of reading begin. It is at that juncture, at the level of questioning as opposed to acceptance, that the work is set in motion, that the outer process, the work itself, commences.

NOTES

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2. Eisenstein, Sergei, "Methods of Montage," from *Film Form*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1949, trans. and ed. by Jay Leyda, p. 82.
3. Boujut, Michel, "Le Milieu du monde ou le cinéma selon Tanner," Editions l'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1974, p. 175 (quote by Tanner).
4. Ibid., p. 29-31. The article by Tanner, from which the quotes are drawn, is entitled, "Le 'pourquoi dire' et le 'comment dire.' "
5. An important reference with regards to Berger's concept of criticism as intervention and the continuum involving art object, spectator and artist is Jean-Pierre Oudart's article on the "suture" and the relationship of the human subject/viewer to film. ("La Suture," from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, April-May 1969; reprinted in *Screen*, Winter 77-78, Vol. 18, No. 4, trans. by Kari Hanet, p. 35-47.
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J. J. MURPHY

Chris MacLaine: The Man Who Invented Gold

The virtual neglect of Chris MacLaine's films over the past 25 years constitutes one of the major embarrassments in the history of American experimental cinema. His work had originally been distributed by Kinesis in San Francisco (Bob Greensfelder of Kinesis provided funds, equipment, and space for the making of *The End*) but when Kinesis closed in 1957 and offered its holdings to other firms, MacLaine's films found no takers. It was only through the efforts of Stan Brakhage and Willard Morrison of Audio Film Center that MacLaine's works were brought back into circulation in 1962.

The few facts that are known about MacLaine are, at best, sketchy. His real name was Clifford, but he adopted Christopher, perhaps to allude to his carrying of many burdens. He was a published poet, a sort of down-and-out San Francisco bohemian who—largely through repeated methedrine use—later became one of the psychic casualties of that scene. A destitute and destroyed human being, MacLaine spent his last years confined to a state mental hospital where he died in April of 1975.

Except for the better known *The End* (1953), it is not even possible at this point to date *Beat, Scotch Hop*, and *The Man Who Invented Gold* or to say conclusively that they represent MacLaine's entire output in film. Nevertheless, these films along with the plotless, visually oriented narratives of Ron Rice—*The Flower Thief* (1960) and *Senseless* (1962)—are clearly the most significant work to come out of the so-called beat period. Generalizations are difficult to make about Chris MacLaine's films. Although there is a certain consistency of style about them, each manages to have its own particular idiosyncrasies. It is interesting to note, however, that the filmmaker appears as a character in three of them—*Scotch Hop* being the exception—while all four films contain allusions to bagpipes and MacLaine's Scottish heritage.

Beat and *Scotch Hop* are short visual poems. *Beat* is a somewhat improvisational attempt to capture the mood of this particular cultural period. The images tend to be casual, carefree, even silly, while the erratic cutting and incongruous relationships contribute to the sense of visual play. *Scotch Hop* is more tightly structured, more formal in its attempt to correlate images of Scottish musicians, dancers, and other activities to the music of bagpipes. Action is speeded up, slowed down, interrupted, and juxtaposed in a carefully controlled work that presents subtle correspondences between sound and visuals. The film was somewhat influenced by MacLaine's friendship with Jordan Belson (who was, briefly, cameraman on *The End*).

The End and *The Man Who Invented Gold* are narrative compilation films. They consist of a wide variety of images, some pertaining directly to the narrative, others less so. Both films are remarkably sophisticated in construction, especially in terms of their editing and for their exploration of various narrative possibilities. MacLaine's editing is conceptual and nonlinear. Meaning is often derived from association, such as in the fourth section of *The End* where Paul passes a statue of the Venus de Milo while he contemplates attaching himself to the most hideous leper in the world. At other times, meaning results from accumulation. The metaphorical implications of the bagpipe player proudly marching through a battlefield in the opening shots of *The Man Who Invented Gold*, for example, are only realized later on as the madman-protagonist relates his tale. In both films, images repeat, combine, and in the process create interesting and unusual juxtapositions with the soundtrack. Through the use of repetition, an image that first appears ambiguous is often later clarified through its inclusion in another context.

In relating its prophecy of atomic destruction, *The End* employs intriguing strategies for dealing with narrative. The primary one is a self-conscious parody of the synthetic and illusionistic nature of

the form. Throughout *The End*, the narrative is continually negated, distanced, and subverted. It is internally negated in the first section by a random act of violence. The acting distances us, as does the narrator's choice to occasionally skip the intermediary devices of character and plot in order to speak directly to the audience. And finally, the narrative is materially subverted by MacLaine's compilation technique, especially by his decision to intercut black and white footage with color.

Similar strategies are further elaborated on in the alchemical fairy tale *The Man Who Invented Gold*, a rich and complex 14-minute work that deserves more recognition for its contemporary, uninhibited approach to narrative structure. In this film three different actors—the main one being the film-maker—represent the protagonist. The material subversion in *The Man Who Invented Gold* is somewhat more extreme than in *The End.* Not only does MacLaine intermix black-and-white stock with color, but he also includes hand-painted film stock at various points in the story. Even before the initial credits, the film begins with leader that has been hand-colored. The effect of this is to insist on the essential illusion of the narrative, that what is to follow is a fairy tale, an act of the imagination. MacLaine, thus, upholds the tradition of the fairy tale by employing what amounts to "poetic license" throughout the film. In the scene where the protagonist turns his neighbor and then himself into gold, gold cups over their eyes—a form of synecdoche—suffice to represent their transformation into gold. So much for special effects: this fairy tale insists on its own sense of fantasy.

The fable told in the narration of *The Man Who Invented Gold* is relatively straightforward. The Scottish bagpipe player becomes a kind of metaphor for the madman's precarious and heroic existence in the hostile environment of his neighbors who jeer and mock him throughout the tale for his alchemical pursuits. Their laughter is part of it, he insists, but the barbs eventually get the best of him. When the protagonist does find the missing ingredient that will allow him to transform sulphur into gold, his anger at their rejection causes him to turn both a neighbor and himself into gold. On a psychological level, the madman's alienation from his neighbors partially explains his obsession with the apocalyptic powers of alchemy. But alchemy, at least historically, was practiced as a form of spiritual discipline. Seen this way, MacLaine's fairy tale becomes a parable of the inner life of the poet—or anyone who chooses to deviate from the accepted norm.

The alchemical transformations in *The Man Who Invented Gold* stem from the magical properties of the camera—the ones initially explored by Méliès.[1] This is especially apparent in the sequence where the colored powders are sprinkled on top of each other at the end of the film. As *The Man Who Invented Gold* comes to conclusion, the powders are then shown in reverse, so that they fly up and out of the frame. The colored powders are the madman's ingredients for creating gold. The association is implied very early in the film by a cut that connects the powdered substance to the narrator's statement: "Many men have labored believing they could find the formula for gold." The metamorphosis takes place through the animation of the rainbow-colored ingredients, followed by animated rainbow colored credits of the film's title, and finally by a shot containing a rainbow that is tacked on after the credits. Thus, the real alchemy occurs in the magical cinematic transformation of the powders and credits into the rainbow—at the end of which, as we all know from countless fairy tales, there most surely exists a pot of gold.

The Man Who Invented Gold is unrelentingly subjective in its presentation. Action and location are constantly fractured by spatial and temporal discontinuities reminiscent of Buñuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). Both films introduce conventional narrative techniques such as match-action shots in order to radically subvert them. In the surrealistic *Un Chien Andalou,* the man falls in a room only to land in a field and the woman opens a door that leads to a beach. MacLaine likewise uses the technique of extending an action through different locations. *The Man Who Invented Gold* contains a shot where the protagonist opens one door and in the next shot—greenish tint this time, taken from essentially the same camera position—comes through another. He is wearing different clothes. Similarly, in the early part of the film when the madman is set to go out for a walk in order to ponder the missing ingredient, the cutting implies that he is at the top of a wooden

staircase. But when the protagonist actually descends the stairs, the location has changed and the steps are made of stone.

The Man Who Invented Gold often involves a contradiction between the information told in the narration and what is actually seen. In one sequence, the narrator indicates that it is night ("And then went home the evening spent and looked through a special slit in the moon known only to him . . . "), as we watch the main character walk through a park in broad daylight, carrying a flashlight. The flashlight is another example of poetic license—day for night shooting—and it reinforces the idea that it is night. The park, however, is hardly the madman's home. At another point in the film, the sound track describes the protagonist walking to a door when, in the visuals, he lifts the shade on a window. The next shot has him appear in front of a door. Another discrepancy occurs very early in *The Man Who Invented Gold* when the narrator speaks of an incident happening forty years ago, since none of the three characters who play the protagonist could possibly be the age implied.

Not only does MacLaine raise important questions regarding sound-image relationships, but he poses equally confounding questions about sequential meaning. How is one to interpret the black-and-white sequence in *The Man Who Invented Gold* where the protagonist walking through the woods is intercut with what appears to be a shot of the moon? (The qualification is necessary because elsewhere in the film, MacLaine plays a perceptual joke on the viewer when what appears to be a shot of the moon is revealed to be a knothole.) Is it meant to convey, as Eisenstein might have argued, that it is actually night or is it shorthand for the passage of time, in this case, one day? The latter is especially plausible in as much as the narrator earlier used the phrase "four moons ago." Yet it is precisely as a result of its openendedness that *The Man Who Invented Gold* (or *The End*, for that matter) manages to raise such important theoretical issues about the medium. As the narrator in the fifth section of *The End* puts it: "Here is a character. Here is the most beautiful music on earth. Here are some pictures. What is happening?" Questions of meaning and interpretation, he simply reminds us, are equally the responsibility of the viewer. Or as Sol Worth has written: "First, the meaning which we make of visual forms is just that: ***meanings which we make.*** Films, stories, drawings, paintings, and so on, ***do not*** have any meaning in and of themselves, in any intrinsic way. They are artifacts until we either attribute or infer meanings to and from them."[2]

Through its use of an open form, *The Man Who Invented Gold* ultimately becomes a viewer-oriented film. The shots do not collide with each other to create new meanings as in Eisenstein nor are they metaphorically linked together as in Pudovkin. Rather, the images are organized as a field of energy. Because causal linear connections between shots are eschewed, their relation is not fixed and as a consequence the images tend to reverberate back and forth in space and time. Some of the images in the film appear to be gratuitous—the shot of a blimp is a good example. Others remain unspecified, such as the armed forces day float of the bomb, but they nevertheless contribute to the ambience of paranoia that pervades the film. But there are also certain ambiguous images which are clarified through context. In one particular scene in the film the narrator, talking about his imminent alchemical discovery, says: "When you awake, you will be the goldman, madman." "The goldman, the goldman . . . " is then repeated on the sound track in a demented voice that one supposes to be the taunt of the neighbors. At exactly this point, a parade float of a huge stone statue passes by. The ironic implications of this connection between the goldman and the statue are, of course, not known until later on the film when the madman himself becomes metamorphosized into a gold statue. Stan Brakhage described an experience he had with Chris MacLaine in the early sixties:

> . . . and he was staying overnight and talking and talking and he was very much high with the jargon of speed (I'm sure he loaded up on speed before he'd walked into my door) and he would start a sentence and it would . . . every word that he could possibly fit into it would end with "ville"—you know, "man this is itsville"—and the minute he would get to "ville" the sentence would break and a new sentence would start that had absolutely nothing clearly recognizable to do with the previous sentence. All these tracks were running simultaneously and he'd leap from one to another, but if you listened long enough, all the stories finally unwound in the whole tapestry of his talking . . . [3]

What is fascinating about Brakhage's account is that it serves as an excellent description of the film-maker's holistic approach to structuring images which, for the viewer, more or less involves suspending judgment until the gestalt can be determined.

The Man Who Invented Gold is a richly connotative work that suggests new possibilities of narrative structure, of montage, and for combining images and sound. The issues it raises regarding the cognitive aspects of sequence and contextual meaning are important ones currently engaging film theory, particularly the area of film language inquiry Sol Worth has termed "vidistics."[4] It is difficult to explain then why such a brilliantly inventive film as *The Man Who Invented Gold* has gone so unnoticed. The sad irony, of course, is how closely this unfortunate situation mirrors the narrative of MacLaine's fairy tale.

NOTES

1. Stan Brakhage expressed a similar idea in an October 30, 1962 letter to David Brooks: "*The Man Who Invented Gold* is a film fable so structured that all alchemical searchings are clearly filmwise (gold being discovered cinematically in each sequence—mixed black and white and color—throughout the film) so that when the drama-discovery, or story-wise discovery, is actually made it acts as a deliberate anti-climax of aesthetic perfection . . . " See *Film Culture*, No. 29, Summer 1963, p. 10.
2. Sol Worth, "Doing Anthropology of Visual Communication," *Working Papers In Culture And Communication* (Temple University: Department of Anthropology) Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 9.
3. Transcription of recorded remarks made by Stan Brakhage at SUNY-Buffalo's Center for Media Study as part of the Buffalo Conference on Autobiography in the Independent American Cinema, March 22-25, 1973.
4. Sol Worth defines vidistics: "Vidistics is concerned, first, with the determination and codification of visual 'language' elements as used in sequence by the filmmaker. Second, it is concerned with the determination of these laws of 'language' by which a viewer infers meaning from cognitive representations and interactions of the elements and their sequence." See Worth, "Cognitive Aspects of Sequence in Visual Communication," *Audio Visual Communication Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1968), pp. 132-133.

Reviews

PERCEVAL

Director: Eric Rohmer. Script: Adapted by Rohmer from the novel by Chrétien de Troyes. Decor: Jean-Pierre Kohut-Svelko. Costumes: Jacques Schmidt. Photography: Nestor Almendros. Music: Guy Robert. New Yorker Films.

Medieval culture represented a certain extremity in human history, an overt set of contrasts and contradictions which were to provide fertile ground for fictional exploitation by all the media of later periods, starting virtually as soon as the era had ended. Sometime in the fifteenth century, with the invention of the printing press and the concurrent general shifts in language, economic/political structure, and ideology, a sharp discontinuity seemed to form in the fabric of history. The medieval sensibility appeared to die out with amazing abruptness, and henceforward the era's extremes—not merely of wealth and poverty, authority and license, but also of color and dun, chivalry and sadism, mariolatry and misogyny, and so forth—seemed to provide convenient frameworks into which "modern" authors, from Mallory in the fifteenth century, to Shakespeare, to Walter Scott, to T. S. White, could conveniently insert any particular ideology they happened to hold. The medieval sensibility never again spoke for itself in the secular realm, and survived in attenuated form only in the rituals and dogmas of Catholicism, so that we see the era now only through the distorting caricatures created by later artists, reviling or romanticizing the age.

The film medium has followed earlier arts in exploiting the surface rather than the substance of medieval culture, whether for the entertainment values of color and pageantry in the swashbucklers (*Robin Hood, Ivanhoe, etc.*) or for the philosophical demonstrativeness of its terrors, in the works of Bergman, Bresson, etc. Even ostensibly serious historical dramas like *A Lion in Winter* severely violate the spirit of the age, by dressing essentially contemporary ideological conflicts in medieval clothing.

Eric Rohmer's *Perceval* is a one-of-a-kind film, differing from all previous "medieval" movies because it not only recreates the twelfth-century *roman* on which it's based, but actually embodies it. It is, apparently, the first time in centuries that a medieval poet is allowed to speak for himself. In most respects, *Perceval* is the film Chrétien de Troyes himself might have shot, were he a time-traveller given access to a camera. And, in turn, *Perceval* gives us the opportunity for time-travel backward without the risks of plague, lice or leprosy, to sample a sensibility in which the sense of wonder was the common birthright of the meanest of men, and the saving grace of a chaotic age.

Chrétien de Troyes was a poet who moved in the glorious circles of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and was beloved by the literati of the period for the special combination of ironic humor, carefully thought-out piety, and brilliant verse which characterized his work. Rohmer based his script faithfully on Chrétien's *roman de Perceval*, a story of the blunders of a teen-age knight that remains as entertaining today, it seems, as it was at the court of Philip of Flanders. Armed with this script, Rohmer has constructed a medieval style and setting which paraphrase the images of the *roman* in ways that are deeply faithful to the spirit of the work, but with no sense of dry scholarship or pedantry. With charming actors, skilled musicians, and brilliantly artificial sets, Rohmer joyously creates the image of fairy-tale-come-true, which is a far cry from mere fairy tale: the fairy tales in our mind are all dressed in twelfth-century garb, the same garb they wore when they were told in that period itself.

Rohmer's project—the filming of Chrétien's *roman* on its own terms—seems an eccentric one, but it's easy to infer the reasons for its attraction to the director in the context of his other work. His "six moral tales" explored the dilemma of the serious Catholic male faced with the worldly sexual temptations of pagan contemporary females. These tales were followed by *La Marquise D'O*, a near-medieval parable of mariolatry and atonement, in which an honorable soldier purifies himself through lengthy and repentant celibacy for a moment of sexual rapacity toward a pure woman. For Rohmer, the Perceval story would be a philosophical relief, and a release—a return to the

basics of Catholic morality as expressed by a poet for whom a thoughtful orthodox Catholicism reigned supreme.

Perceval is nothing if not a moral tale, a story whose Catholic ethos is built into the bone. The hero is a country bumpkin with an infantile concern for food, drink, and showy armor, who develops gradually into a great knight, and then past chivalry into Christianity through the discovery of the contradiction between prowess and charity. Perceval may or may not be sexually initiated by Blanche, the lady of Bellerepoire (this is ambiguous in both Chrétien and Rohmer), but his pure love for the lady—mariolatry translated into courtly love—is the beginning of his awakening. When Perceval sees the Holy Grail at the castle of the Fisher King, shortly after leaving Blanche, he's still too callow to recognize its significance, too involved with his dinner to notice the spiritual food being paraded before his eyes, too concerned with literally following the rules of chivalric discretion to ask the necessary questions, and finally too naive to look beneath appearance to find reality. As he matures, he becomes able to recognize the grievousness of this and his other errors, and he becomes a knight who transcends mere chivalry for the sake of true charity.

In contrast, we see (in a digression typical of the fiction of the era) Sir Gouvain (Gawain), the very gentil parfit knight, the flawless paragon of the secular virtues most respected by his age, in a typical adventure (travelling anonymously to meet a challenger, he reveals his identity to please and aid a neglected nymphet; subsequently, he is entertained at the castle of his enemy, neither of them realizing the other's identity.) Gouvain exists in the framework of *Perceval* so that Perceval may surpass him in inner *vertu:* after years of wanderings, Perceval encounters a hermit in the woods, who reminds him of the religious ideals hidden beneath the chivalric ones, and ever after, Perceval will devote himself to the practice of true charity.

Thus, Perceval is the Rohmer hero perfected: his sexuality is transformed by spirituality, and his worldly prowess is finally turned solely to the service of selfless charity: *"Carité, qui de sa bone oevre/ Pas se vant,ançois se coevre"* ("Charity, which of its good work/ Doesn't boast, instead it hides"), according to Chrétien's opening lines.

Fabrice Luchini and Arielle Dombasle: PERCEVAL

Rohmer presents this story from *within a* medieval context, overcoming the handicap of a modern medium to tell an ancient tale. Rather than working with the literal conventions of medieval drama —conventions which have not only lost their meaning by now, but have also become rather boring—Rohmer translates these conventions into a format suitable for his medium and era. The director avoids the error of his bumbling hero —that of taking things too literally—but rather uses his artistic judgment to afford a graceful, if slightly flawed translation. As a result, we see a filmed re-creation of the mental state of the Middle Ages, a film whose images reflect, perhaps, the images in the minds of the court ladies of Aquitaine as they read the *roman* aloud to each other.

To the medieval mentality, the most iconoclastic element of Rohmer's film would probably be the use of a *roman*, however pious, rather than a Bible story as the basis for drama. The medieval theater was, for all its spectacle, rudimentary at best, and aside from a few short farces, it drew its texts from scripture alone. The texts were rewritten in simple verse (at first in Latin, but changing in the twelfth century to the vernaculars) and were sung to a musical accompaniment by amateur actors (initially clerics, but subsequently laymen took part.)

In his text, Rohmer follows not only the form but the spirit of medieval theater. Using a modern French translation which cleaves closely to the original, *Perceval* maintains both the rhymes and the simple tetrameter rhythm of Chrétien's romance. Like that of any drama of the period, the text is mainly sung, with a few spoken interjections. A

small group of adept musicians playing antique instruments appear occasionally as individuals, in small roles, but mostly as a chorus, singing the expositional sections of the narrative to authentic-sounding, quite lovely melodies, much in the manner of, for example, *The Play of Daniel.*

The actors enunciate the text with exceptional clarity—a medieval necessity. The drama of the Middle Ages was initially performed inside the church, and later (as the crowds grew) moved into the church courtyard; the lack of the raked seats and acoustically designed basins of the modern theater made precise enunciation a requisite if audiences were to understand a word of the plays.

Rohmer hews closely not only to the text, but also to the narrational methods of Chrétien, following medieval interests rather than modern ones. Our concept of Arthurian romance has been distorted by Mallory's nostalgic *Morte d'Artur*, written in the late fifteenth century, long after the fact. (Chrétien, too, was writing about an earlier time, but Mallory's nostalgia is for Chrétien's era, not Arthur's.) Mallory's work is essentially modern: it's filled with action, and combat is emphasized. Battles are shown in great detail, with endless blow-by-blow accounts of who smote whom. In the twelfth century, however, the details of knightly violence were all too familiar to everyone, including the noble ladies who read the *romans* (and who probably had to sit through many a dull tourney, like dutiful dates at football games.) Thus, Chrétien brushes over the combat scenes in the brusquest manner possible, saying, "If I wished I could describe it fully, but I will not, since one word is as good as twenty." Rohmer follows suit, showing duels rarely and rapidly, and using Chrétien's apologiae in the actor's speeches. Combat is considered boring: what matters is that Perceval wins, not *how* he wins. The conflict in the story lies in Perceval's own nature, rather than in his physical adventures.

Then too, "emotive," personal acting began with Elizabethan drama. In the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, as far as we can tell, acting was a matter of stereotypy, whether by the professional comedians a-birthing the *Commedia dell'Arte* in the town square, or by the stolid guildsmen and priests of the liturgical dramas in the church courtyard. Feelings were to be described, not demonstrated. True to the form and spirit of the art, Rohmer's characters convey their feelings by an aside to the audience, telling (not showing) how the character felt. This is not to say that the acting in the film is poor or stiff (in fact, it's graceful and rather charming); what is avoided here is "the big scene," the moment of ego gratification for the dramatic actor. Modern expectations may be violated by the relative flatness of affect, but how much greater would be the violation of medieval religious art if an individual actor were allowed to glorify himself! The context is that of anonymously built catherals, sculptures, illuminations, tapestries. In the text, Perceval's particular virtue lies in his ability to forget himself, in contrast to the surface perfection (and spiritual emptiness) of the ever self-aware Gouvain.

Rohmer unabashedly includes Chrétien's digression to Gouvain's little adventure. No shame in this: the medieval mind was apparently quite distractible, and Gouvain serves an important function in the story. According to Karl Uitti, "a certain irregularity is missing in Gawain; he is perhaps too perfect, or maybe his perfection is merely too external." Kind, considerate, prudent, courtly and articulate, he is far more charming than Perceval (and in the film, better-looking by far), but his virtues are culture-bound and time-bound, while Perceval's are, in a Catholic context, eternal. Modern audiences must, of course, prefer the worldly Gouvain to the awkward Perceval, but this is precisely the point: Rohmer doesn't, or he'd have chosen a different tale to tell.

On the other hand, Rohmer omits a few details of the *roman:* the Hideous Damsel, whose context is supernatural, appears directly after Perceval leaves the Fisher King's magic castle, two chapters earlier than in the *roman*, replacing the Weeping Maiden of the original. This seems an apt change in the text: the messages of the Weeping Maiden and the Hideous Damsel are virtually identical, and in film, it's easier to accept the supernatural when it's been established in the previous scene than to attempt to recreate the atmosphere in a later, more "naturalistic" context. Rohmer precisely captures the ambience of the Damsel; in the words of David C. Fowler, "Certainly she reminds us of the widespread motif of the supernatural being, beautiful in her own realm, but

horribly ugly in this world." Rohmer uses a beautiful, feline woman in a fright-wig with horrible make-up as his Hideous Damsel.

He also omits the sword given to Perceval by the Fisher King. One can surmise that the symbolism of the Fisher King section is difficult enough without the further bewilderment of a sword which may or may not break in the first conflict, according to who's talking about it. Even Loomis has noted: "Chrétien felt bound to follow his source in its aberrations as well as its felicities. The Grail scene was to him a mystery, and the hermit's explanation of it as unsatisfactory as it is to us." The sword element in the Grail scene is not only inadequately explained in the *roman*, but its significance differs in the accounts of the Weeping Maiden and the hermit. If Rohmer was to present this parable believably, he must have felt it necessary to omit at least this one element, with its dizzying contradictions.

Finally, Rohmer makes an astute alteration in the ending of the story. Where Chrétien's Perceval spends two days with the hermit, makes confession and obtains communion, Rohmer's hero enacts the role of Christ in the Passion Play. This is truthfulness to spirit, not form. According to Allardyce Nichol, "The acting business was obviously not merely a game, but something of real importance for the world . . . The effect of Christ's crucifixion would not be complete unless the actor himself suffered." The actor taking on the role of Christ would *be* Christ for the length of the drama, would suffer physically from cuts and bruises (or worse) as he enacted the Passion. Rohmer could have found no more apt means to portray Perceval's acceptance of Christianity: the knight is not Christ himself, but the actor who plays Christ, an honor not given lightly.

The most controversial aspect of the film is, oddly enough, the sets. While the costumes are relatively scrupulous, if simplified (Rohmer has remembered that colors were a mark of rank, and that the heavy sheet-armor usually seen in films was a device of a later age, an uncomfortable response to the penetrating powers of the longbow), the sets are a good deal odder. Rohmer employs just a few locations, and those extremely stylized. Again, he avoids a precise recreation of medieval stagecraft, which would seem dry and confining, but translates the sets of the era into filmic terms.

In medieval drama, the cathedral or its courtyard was transformed into a stage set by the construction of a few simple "mansions" or *"lieus"* around its peripheries, to which the actor would travel in the course of the play. The medieval mind deliberately indulged in Perceval's error: "To Perceval, things are what they seem . . . his mistaken expectations of functions derive from Perceval's confusion of metaphor and symbol with concrete realities," according to Madeleine Pelner Cosman. Perceval's mental set is mirrored in medieval sets, which replace concrete realities with metaphor and symbol. Rohmer follows this tradition with purely metaphoric locales: bizarre artificial trees stand for a forest, and the same tiny castle is used repeatedly for all the castles in the film.

Why didn't Rohmer use real trees and castles? First of all, the medieval view of nature wasn't nature, but *Natura* personified, the symbol of God's order which, in all the arts, was represented by conventions rather than actualities. Chrétien's Perceval opens with a description of springtime which is almost precisely echoed two centuries later in Chaucer's *Prologue:* different springs, different centuries, different languages, but the same imagery. According to Allardyce Nichol, this principle occurred in medieval theater as well as in its literature: "Nowhere, even in the most spectacular productions of mystery cycles, is there any attempt to depict realistically any particular scene. The built-up mansions were designed to suggest, rather than to reproduce the reality, and when such built-up mansions were not available, a plain curtain or the wall of a hall could serve as a background for the players. Their actions and words were sufficient to stimulate the spectators' imaginations into giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."

Rohmer works consistently with something like "airy nothing," using an overtly artificial tree or false-fronted palace to suggest a *"lieu."* The proportion of his castle is, amusingly, precisely that of medieval art, in which a man was often as tall as a house, as in the fourteenth-century drawings for the *Terence Des Ducs* manuscript. Rohmer's overtly artificial castles are necessitated by the

medieval view of nature, medieval visual arts, and most of all, medieval sense of proportion. It would appear that the people of that era had little sense of priorities: all sense impressions appear to have been vivid, overwhelming, and equal, and a man in front of a castle was, of course, as tall as the castle.

[based on *Terence des Ducs*, manuscript of the late fourteenth century]

More important, in film, is to somehow re-establish the particular closeness with the audience characteristic of medieval theater. If, in the plays of the time, "a sharp demarcation between those enacting the plays and those looking on was frequently absent and, indeed, was often impossible to secure" (Nichols), film sets showing true perspective (and necessitating long shots, overhead shots, etc., to show the whole set) would destroy the sense of audience and action being one, by requiring distance from the actors. Instead, Rohmer uses his tiny castles and a static, level camera held at such distance from the actors as to show their whole bodies, to establish what is essentially an eye-to-eye viewpoint, with the characters filling the frame in approximately the same perspective as if they were standing before us. The medieval sense of proportion is followed, and the modern insistence on perspective is abandoned: medieval man had damn little perspective.

The colors of the film have a brilliance like those of medieval illuminations, a brilliance rarely present in nature. Just as Perceval was distracted by the glitter of the knights' armor, and Chrétien was distracted by an adventure of Gouvain, so the medieval mind was distracted by colorful surfaces. Barbara Tuchman has commented on the "childishness" of medieval behavior, the "marked inability to restrain any kind of impulse"; this childishness, or child*like*ness, found expression as much in the arts of the era as in its social institutions.

Rohmer's only major digression, or error, in maintaining the inner truth of his story may lie in the bizarrely artificial trees he uses to represent forests. He may, for once, have been guilty of excessive literalness, perhaps reading in the Prologue for a fifteenth-century Resurrection drama a prescription for the trees of Paradise, which "ought to be made from paper among which there should be branches of trees, some flowering, others carrying fruits of several species . . . and such things artificially made." Rohmer's trees are all too "artificially made." The avoidance of naturalism, in accord with the era, here becomes obtrusive; the trees of *Perceval* bear little resemblance to the conventional trees of medieval manuscripts, so far as one can determine, or to anything else, for that matter. Their apparent self-consciousness is all the more jarring in a context in which the skills of actors, musicians, designers, and even the director are utilized with a scrupulous avoidance of individuality, in accord with the religion-ridden arts of the period the film embodies.

In most respects, however, the filmed *Perceval* maintains an astonishing truthfulness to the mentality which produced the *roman*. The film has been criticized negatively, on occasion, for its relative flatness, its lack of searing drama, and its overt artificiality. All these criticisms are true, and yet invalid: they are criticisms of the era, not the film. For most audiences, the sensibility of the twelfth century is perhaps a difficult one to enter, due to the massive cultural changes which took place in Europe some 300 years later, and all but erased the medieval way of thought. It is easier to take in fictionalized, romanticized form, but Rohmer has chosen instead to recapture it on its own terms, in all its naiveté, piety, and blank credulity, in a film whose primary excitement lies not in drama, or action, or intellectualizing, but in a wondrous, child-like, and deeply authentic viewpoint.

—NAOMI WISE

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MESSIDOR

Alain Tanner's last three films compose a three-dimensional ethnographic map of industrialized Europe. *Le Rétour d'Afrique* showed us people pretending to stretch their horizons, but, unable to overcome their own economic and social limitations, maintaining a 20th-century troglodytic lifestyle until their "return" from Africa. *Le Milieu du Monde* cast in relief the valleys and the heights as the dwelling places of the established versus the transient inhabitants of an indecisive Europe. *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en l'An 2000* illustrates the distance between the rooted urban population and the pioneers of a nature both geographically and humanistically removed from the mainstream of Swiss life.

In *Messidor* Tanner has examined routes of an uprooted generation, where the potential mobility of hitchhiking comes into conflict with the stability of the Swiss. The genre should be a road movie, albeit with soft shoulders. Tanner has not produced a feminist film, but the female leads in his road movie seem all the more vulnerable for that femininity. The Swiss disapproval of young women carrying on this way is all the more predictable in a country where women have been enfranchised every so haltingly canton by canton only *in this decade.* There is, however, no reason to believe that Tanner thinks their fate is reserved for the "weaker" sex. As an aside, one might note that his understanding for these young women could stem from his own respect but natural paternal concern for his two spirited teenage daughters. Jeanne (Clementine Amouroux) and Marie (Catherine Retoré) take to the Swiss roads on summer vacation, a tour that turns into an exploration of what Switzerland can offer them in the way of hospitality. No easy ride, that.

To the sound of music (there being nothing more dulcet than the voice of German lieder celebrating the joy of wandering), the film's credits are cast against Alpine slopes. The aerial shot brings us to the edge of a precipice in acrophobic euphoria and then cuts sharply to Retoré on a station platform as the train pulls away from her doe-eyed disappointment. Another cut to a balcony introduces Amouroux, who announces to an invisible and apparently indifferent partner that she's got to get out of the city. Her voice is drowned by the traffic; and the sound bridges a cut to the freeway where both girls are hitchhiking and duly picked up by a commuter who airs his prejudices against girls studying. We've hit the road.

Tanner establishes their friendship as the non-questioning fellowship of travelers. At the outset of this rather archetypal journey, the girls don mythological pseudonyms as the muses of history (Clio) and comedy (Thalia), each providing the other with inspiration. Thus, Amouroux plays a history student to Retoré's clown. Without waxing pedantic, Tanner incorporates this bit of academic wit as the practical joke of a history student enamored of her studies of the past—a knowledge that fetches forth from an almost forgotten past a last name for both girls, "Messidor," the name for the harvest month in the French revolutionary calendar: 18 June to 18 July, the fictive time of the film, as well. (If it's not properly projected, it will look like the rainy season, as it did at this year's Berlinale where the Berliners duly recognize it as summer.)

This pseudonym unites them in a fabrication typical of the odyssey as we know it from classical examples. As Odysseus and Clint Eastwood used the name "no-man" in order to nullify their past, so Messidor, a sort of "no man's land" following the French Revolution, nullifies the past. The promise of change in the shake-up of 1968 has not led to a harvest of liberal programs and political democracy; it would seem to have reverted to a past even more repressive. The presence of a

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MESSIDOR

Alain Tanner's last three films compose a three-dimensional ethnographic map of industrialized Europe. *Le Rétour d'Afrique* showed us people pretending to stretch their horizons, but, unable to overcome their own economic and social limitations, maintaining a 20th-century troglodytic lifestyle until their "return" from Africa. *Le Milieu du Monde* cast in relief the valleys and the heights as the dwelling places of the established versus the transient inhabitants of an indecisive Europe. *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en l'An 2000* illustrates the distance between the rooted urban population and the pioneers of a nature both geographically and humanistically removed from the mainstream of Swiss life.

In *Messidor* Tanner has examined routes of an uprooted generation, where the potential mobility of hitchhiking comes into conflict with the stability of the Swiss. The genre should be a road movie, albeit with soft shoulders. Tanner has not produced a feminist film, but the female leads in his road movie seem all the more vulnerable for that femininity. The Swiss disapproval of young women carrying on this way is all the more predictable in a country where women have been enfranchised every so haltingly canton by canton only *in this decade.* There is, however, no reason to believe that Tanner thinks their fate is reserved for the "weaker" sex. As an aside, one might note that his understanding for these young women could stem from his own respect but natural paternal concern for his two spirited teenage daughters. Jeanne (Clementine Amouroux) and Marie (Catherine Retoré) take to the Swiss roads on summer vacation, a tour that turns into an exploration of what Switzerland can offer them in the way of hospitality. No easy ride, that.

To the sound of music (there being nothing more dulcet than the voice of German lieder celebrating the joy of wandering), the film's credits are cast against Alpine slopes. The aerial shot brings us to the edge of a precipice in acrophobic euphoria and then cuts sharply to Retoré on a station platform as the train pulls away from her doe-eyed disappointment. Another cut to a balcony introduces Amouroux, who announces to an invisible and apparently indifferent partner that she's got to get out of the city. Her voice is drowned by the traffic; and the sound bridges a cut to the freeway where both girls are hitchhiking and duly picked up by a commuter who airs his prejudices against girls studying. We've hit the road.

Tanner establishes their friendship as the non-questioning fellowship of travelers. At the outset of this rather archetypal journey, the girls don mythological pseudonyms as the muses of history (Clio) and comedy (Thalia), each providing the other with inspiration. Thus, Amouroux plays a history student to Retoré's clown. Without waxing pedantic, Tanner incorporates this bit of academic wit as the practical joke of a history student enamored of her studies of the past—a knowledge that fetches forth from an almost forgotten past a last name for both girls, "Messidor," the name for the harvest month in the French revolutionary calendar: 18 June to 18 July, the fictive time of the film, as well. (If it's not properly projected, it will look like the rainy season, as it did at this year's Berlinale where the Berliners duly recognize it as summer.)

This pseudonym unites them in a fabrication typical of the odyssey as we know it from classical examples. As Odysseus and Clint Eastwood used the name "no-man" in order to nullify their past, so Messidor, a sort of "no man's land" following the French Revolution, nullifies the past. The promise of change in the shake-up of 1968 has not led to a harvest of liberal programs and political democracy; it would seem to have reverted to a past even more repressive. The presence of a

Messidor ten years after the counter-culture set out to save society should send us back to the textbooks to understand this visitation of an almost forgotten era. Tanner said in an interview, "Time passes, I pass; things change, or they don't change, but that still reminds me that I change." In Tanner's last three films, hope seems to lie in personal change; but in *Messidor*, personal change and social change seem so disparate as to represent a danger to each other. Tanner's characters are like spectres; unrecognized and foreign to the time and place, the adventurers pass through a landscape and come to the realization that they don't belong there. As in the mythic case of Odysseus, the subterfuge of the name provides only temporary cover and actually indicates their existence on a mythopoeic level. Thus, it is not the girls themselves, but their nôm-de-plume—their signature—that confronts Modern Switzerland. This ought to establish that the point of view of Messidor is that of a spectre reviewing revolutionary results.

Just as we cannot know that this is a road film in the first two sequences, Jeanne and Marie are not aware that their separately planned vacations will lead to drifting and into a game with a gun that will plunge them into the terrorist turmoil of the seventies: an odyssey of rape, escape, heisting a gun, illegal lodgings, intimidation tactics with the weapon, threats to use it, and ultimately using it—all of which is liberally laced with a police dragnet and culminates in both girls being arrested. The final shot of the film is a man's dead body, thus casting all previous events in a causal relation to the murder. Who held the gun? Are the girls really murderers? Both or only one? Is the film a who-dunit in retrospect? With 20/20 hindsight one can see that their first mistake was to take the pistol, but at the time it seems to be a response to their own necessity and unlikely to become for these mild-mannered young women the necessitating factor in a game most accurately described in the silent scene where Jeanne tests her nerves in a round of Russian roulette.

The well-known genre of the road movie provides a skeleton that Tanner has fleshed out with the petty materialism of the Swiss, ranging in degrees from a farmer's outrage that his barn has been slept in, to the impassive stare of tourists as Thalia charmingly begs for bread in every European language she can muster, or the mustering of arms itself from a glove compartment. These violations of property, no matter how disparate, exact extremely paranoid reactions in every case, a reflection on the tendency of these prosperous EEC countries to poison the "Wanderlust" that has traditionally seized European youth from Heinrich Heine to Werner Herzog.

Picaresque films about two-women odysseys have been done before, but Tanner grounded all his esthetic wires in a landscape he knew so well that he had become inured to it. Tanner has explained how he recorded on video the route he had driven hundreds of times, and how viewing the video tape revealed to him what he had been overlooking and brought him out of his commuter's alienation to a realistic portrayal of how the highways and the byways of Switzerland warp an instinct for freedom into a criminal instinct. It is not through the usual poltroons and cutthroats of the road that we experience the trip, but rather through the streets, cafés, and landscapes, as he promised in an interview with Michael Tarantino (*Sight and Sound*, Winter 78). Beginning with the very material of an odyssey, he examines Swiss *Gemütlichkeit* (their version of southern hospitality). Homer assures us that the laws of hospitality are sacred and binding for both guest and host; Tanner shows us that there is no longer any such sacred custom or any divine protection for the traveller.

Perhaps the Greek tradition can be aplied even further to Tanner's muses, Clio and Thalia, to observe that the ancient god of travellers, Hermes, was also the patron of liars and thieves. In picaresque literature and films, there is a polite fiction that an appropriate lie or justifiable theft when travelling need not be punished. Thus the hero's incarceration or death is seen to break one of the rules and results in a nebulous sense of injustice. According to such rules, Tanner develops his heroines from travellers to brigands to the two most wanted women in Switzerland. Their trip likewise changes roles from vacation to self-imposed exile to flight.

Thus, as the girls acquire a pseudonym, and embark on their road games, in fitting with the genre, their differences complement each other so

that they partake of a unity as two sides of a coin: Cleo is a shopgirl, more conservative but more playful than Thalia, whose sophomoric knowledge, experimental attitudes, and student sensitivity to social assumptions define the limits of their wanderings. It becomes a game that can only be interesting after they realize imminent boredom must be staved off by making an adventure of the act of living itself, as Thalia explains to a somewhat sceptical but willing Clio.

Tanner's aerial shots of the highway system look like the nerves of its wanderers. As they lace Switzerland, we see the internal efficiency and communication they represent as the last bastion of organization in an increasingly outrageous and outraged world. Although nothing seems easier than curbing two females from resorting to violence, once the machine is set in motion and the television has announced that they must be caught, then with the tautology of a self-fulfilling oracle, everyone plays out his role, however unwilling or unwittingly. The man who stares at the girls too long in the restaurant is the sacrifice—because he has seen them on television or because they are criminals?

Tanner, with his ability to let an atmosphere evolve into a morality with all its advantages and disadvantages, has drawn the dimensions of Switzerland. In areas of dense population where human life scurries to keep pace with technological progress, he packs his shots with information about what the Swiss do, eat, hear, think, say, in their quotidien stuffiness; but what Tanner believes life can evolve into is more than what he has recorded about his self-sufficient little fatherland, although he carefully points out that the urge to be free of the pettiness would seem to be self-destructive, as it was in Jonas when the checker undercharged people who couldn't afford the prices of groceries. He films the girls tramping the auto routes in close-up and medium shots with the effect of making them as big or small as their environment, but when they climb up into the Alps, they are seen as diminutive figures subject to the crags. And in these stark, god- and man-forsaken cliffs, the girls confess to a need for each other and a love that can only find its gesture in a further taboo, homosexuality. In this merely tentative approach, Cleo and Thalia prove to be opposites but fatally attracted to each other, for it is their togetherness that necessitates the game; alone, neither would have the nerve to continue. Their unity is visually expressed by a camera movement that, at first, shows them separated by a chasm on the mountain side. After Clio rejects Thalia but then comes after her, the chasm appears beyond and behind them and, as they embrace, their need to remain together once again changes the nature of their game.

Perhaps this is the cliff promised in the credits sequence. There seems to be nothing more uncompromising than a 90° drop a few inches away. Likewise the emotional world has brought a confrontation of individuals and will require them to compromise. The paradox of road film independence is "divided, they stand; united, they fall." Because they proceed together, their movement seems to be good, in and of itself. The impression of movement and the sheer struggle to stay on the road, when they do consider returning home, becomes a metaphor for progress. No matter how halting that progress, mobility has become the fate of these girls and, as Tanner said, of Europe: "not Switzerland itself, but rather as a symbol for what is happening to the rest of industrial society." Destination becomes irrelevant when they are trapped in the destiny of hitchhiking, something so innocent that it would seem to release them to a wider world. However, the aerial shots of the roads make them visually comprehensible as cancer.

One fatal aspect of the journey is its editing of two personae into a single, schizophrenic personal-

MESSIDOR ▶

ity. What Clio has earned and Thalia has learned feeds them for a while, but they make a quantum leap into the arms of a deadly serious world, where crime is a question of intention. Their reactions and intentions seem to make all decisions teeter back and forth. The gun Thalia heisted and almost threw away provides a sort of fulcrum that tips the film itself into a contemplation of violence through Cleo's reaction. Tanner has a long close-up of Retoré contemplating this exotic weapon with an impassive, determined stare—very much the point of view of the film.

Living off the (in-)hospitality of the road inevitably draws from the girls a reaction in kind. Each breach of hospitality alienates the girls from their environment and vice versa, until the girls' only evidence of their existence is a reenactment of their pointing a pistol at a farmer who would have jailed them for taking shelter in his stable. Television has the function that newspaper headlines had on Bonnie and Clyde. But this form of affirmation of their own existence welds to survival. Tanner makes the resentment and fear of their victims understandable, but the aura of mechanization, of technology gone berserk, begins with the hyperthyroid response of the average viewer to a televised crime. The police measures are also beyond the measure of man—or woman, in this case. Thus the girls come to use the weapon for what it was made for.

In the cinematic terms of Leo Braudy's almost brilliant book, *The World in a Frame*, "Only the open directors can make a truly picaresque film: only the closed directors could make a film that truly explores the obsessions of the individual." What marks Tanner's road movie, for better or worse, is its beginning as an open film, that is, taking in the incidental and incorporating the accidental or geographic boundaries that develop then into the psychological boundaries and circumstantial evidence of a paranoid closed film. The characters are not obsessive at first, but as they develop a resistance to their environment, the intensity of its charge is increased. What begins as a wandering exploration of the world beyond the self becomes a self-sufficient road with no exit, Tanner's closed society. His earlier films have traces of this ambidextrous style, although the closed nature of *Le Milieu du Monde* is atmospherically the closest to *Messidor*. The general disappointment in his new film could be traced back to the audience's preference for the open style so gracefully managed in *Jonas*. Nevertheless, to see Tanner's *Messidor* brings premonitions of the death of the road movie, unless it be a historical film, because it is impossible in a terrorist-obsessed society for misfits like the characters in *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, Wenders, 1976) to function as itinerants of the interior. By putting the narrative of an open film into a setting that is closed, both literally (Switzerland) and metaphorically (these roads are channels), Tanner has shown us the crowded arteries of an immobile world where there's no room for someone not going somewhere.

—KAREN JAEHNE

THE LAST WALTZ

Director: Martin Scorsese. Producer: Robbie Robertson. Production design: Boris Leven. Editing: Yeu-Bun Yee and Jan Roblee. United Artists.

On the basis of *The Last Waltz*, as well as his earlier films, it doesn't seem to me that Martin Scorsese knows much about, despite his obvious interest in, rock music. But perhaps that is part of the reason why he has fashioned one of the best rock films made thus far in this fledgling genre. That the movie is a documentary, a visual and aural recording of the Band's farewell concert, staged at San Francisco's Winterland on Thanksgiving Day 1976, seems secondary to its larger purposes. (Coincidentally, the only other rock documentary that brings intelligence to its form and content is also a "farewell" film, Richard Heffron's *Fillmore*, chronicling the final concert, on July 4, 1971—another patriotic American holiday—at Bill Graham's Fillmore West. Graham also produced the Winterland concert for the Band.) *The Last Waltz* was released at just the right time, before the spate of dumb, prepackaged music shows, geared around potential best-seller sound-track albums, like *FM* or *Thank God It's Friday*, and the summer extravaganzas, *Grease* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.*

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how that music impels, and in some sequences actually structures much of *New York, New York*. That film ambitiously sets out to criticize as well as memorialize an entire now deceased film genre, the forties movie musical, emblemized by MGM product, through intelligent usage of its every stylistic characteristic, not least the music. The pacing of this film, along with *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (in which Ellen Burstyn's piano bar rendition of "Where or When" and the controversial opening "flashback" using Alice Faye's "You'll Never Know" [from *Hello Frisco Hello,* 1943] directly evoke the forties), and *Taxi Driver*, none of which substantially employs rock music, is notably different from the feverish, hypertensive quality of the (fiction) films that do: *Mean Streets,* in which the nonstop music serves as an occasionally ironic, nearly wallpaper-like indicator of mood and emotion, as well as its student-film-précis, *Who's That Knocking at My Door.* In these films, the rock music, without Scorsese's ever really confronting or analyzing the form, is the determinant of the films' hopped-up style.

But certainly a nostalgic fondness for *New York, New York*'s world, which never really existed outside the Hollywood sound stages and the nation's movie theaters, is evident in Scorsese. At a press conference for the New York Film Festival, I had a chance to ask Scorsese about his musical preferences. He responded that his introduction to music was with forties Big Band music (just as his desire to direct films came from watching forties and fifties movies, which also accounts for much of the warm feelings in *New York, New York*), but that that music has led "as a progression" to rock, which he now prefers.

But apart from the music itself, I think what interests Scorsese in rock seems to be its phenomenological accoutrements: the energy it so nonchalantly contains, slowly releases, but never consumes; the awesome power it exerts over audiences, often in a mass sense, which is a bit frightening, as anyone who has been to a "busted" rock concert—one that has gone wrong and soured—may attest. He seems fascinated with probing the peculiarly American rock star myth and raucous lifestyle—the unceasing, rootless touring, the rabid adoration of fans, the drugs and boozing and easy multi-city groupie sex, the

Members of the Band: THE LAST WALTZ

ostentatious display of wealth, the wielding of power, via music, incorporating a space-center-worthy array of electronics, whether for art (Dylan) or commerce (Kiss), and the creation in-concert of a seamless fantasyland. Even the negative elements entail an attractive vulgar glamor like that of glossy potboiler movies like *The Betsy, The Other Side of Midnight,* or *The Greek Tycoon.* That myth, an evenly designed, clear-headed creation of concert promoters, the rock press and record companies, and facilely perpetuated in movies like *Performance, Welcome to LA, Payday,* and the Kristofferson half of *A Star Is Born*, is one of the last great Romantic notions. As an all-encompassing, all-sense enveloping experience, the only thing to come close to the power of in-concert rock is . . . the movies.

Scorsese is also interested in longevity, its traits, values and problems, and in the impact of passing time, which is often computed in his films in terms of physical distance, as in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, or in the incessant, even neurotic movement of *Mean Streets.* (It's also no accident that Travis Bickle drives a cab.) When Scorsese met them for the film, the Band had played together, cut records, and toured for more than 16 years. It was a group decision to call a halt; they had developed other interests (one of them, Robbie Robertson, decided to produce *The Last Waltz*). In one of the film's many interview sequences, cut in between the musical numbers, Robertson, the Band's lead guitar and vocalist, sums it up: "The Road has taken a lot of the great ones." He mentions Joplin, Presley, Morrison,

Holly. "It's a goddamn impossible way of life." Earlier, he had looked away from the camera, saying, "Man, I couldn't have handled 20 years." He laughs incredulously at the thought of it. (It is perhaps not so unusual to note that Robertson, who produced the film, dominates the movie's interview footage—he learns fast.)

The Band—the simple name was deliberately chosen to repudiate the garish psychedelically named groups (Strawberry Alarm Clock, Ultimate Spinach, et al.) prevalent in the 60's—has always been composed of Robertson, Rick Danko (bass), Garth Hudson (organ), Richard Manuel (piano)—all Canadians—and Levon Helm (drums), from Arkansas. As a group, they actually go back to the late fifties when they toured for six years in seedy one-night-stands through Canada and the rough-and-tumble US south and southwest, working their asses off as "The Hawks" behind Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins, one of rock's great madmen/legends, who fits the more negative, self-destructive dimensions of the rock star myth, albeit an early version—so early that he was never able to take advantage of it and become famous. Together, they were a loud, cutthroat, rockabilly bar band and seldom were afforded the luxury of recording. Hawkins was responsible for forging them into a band (he proudly comes out to do the film concert's first number), but they left him when Dylan, in 1965, shocking his fans by "going electric," asked them to tour as his backup. It was a move that most rock critics dub the beginning of the folk-rock movement. They worked on their songs in a ranch house (the "Big Pink" of their first album title) in West Saugerties, NY, then migrated a bit north to Woodstock to rejoin Dylan in 1966 during his "creative rest period," when he was recuperating from his near-fatal motorcycle accident. Dylan eventually left them to return to Greenwich Village and other forms of music. But the Band kept on, together, and their second, and probably best-known album, released late in 1969, is a classic; it put them, as well as country-rock, on the charts. The fans and media fell to—including a *Time* cover story on January 12, 1970, and they've been up there, without even a brief decline in popularity, ever since. Until 1976, when the Band disbanded.

About midway through *The Last Waltz*'s repertoire of 26 numbers, featuring a parade of "friends"—guest artists who signed on for the final concert—Scorsese works a cumulative small miracle that continues to deepen in impact through the rest of the film. The artists, ranging from The Staples to Dr. John to Eric Clapton and Ringo Starr, emblemize the sixties to early-seventies, and the film becomes a moving testament to that tumultuous time, a non-nostalgic chronicle and summation of where we and they have been, and what we've all gone through. The songs are exactly the same as when they were first performed, indigenous and locked into that specific time period, but we and the singers are different, changed. Looking at them now, we can see the rough passing of the years. Neil Diamond, singing "Dry Your Eyes," is pudgy with Top-40 success and verges on Tom Jones-y, self-parodying macho kitsch; Neil Young, hollow-eyed, looking as if he's felt the draining torment of the raw, brilliant songs he wrote and sang in album after album since his easy-going Crosby-Stills-Nash days, cuts loose on "Helpless"; Joni Mitchell, large-eyed, thin and bony, sings "Coyote"; Van Morrison, puffy, clean-shaven, double-knitted, working on a second chin, like a has-been Vegas lounge lizard, comes on for "Caravan."

Several of the performances are utterly electrifying: Neil Young's, and the changeless Muddy Waters—the man who has seen and survived more of the Road than most of these people put together—and his exuberant rendition of his classic "Mannish Boy." Dylan himself, the grand mentor, a sixties icon, appears near the end; the camera slowly coasts down over his white rock-star hat, searching for his face hidden behind the brim (like David Bowie's in the last shot of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*).

Somehow, Scorsese has managed to avoid the multitude of clichés of the rock concert film; after all, the raw material—a group on a stage—is largely the same, film to film. He has also managed, particularly in the interview sequences, to defeat the childish, ego-bound pretensions of many rock stars and their films (e.g., Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains the Same*), pretentious by their very venturing into film, a move too easily and stupidly taken (most rock stars take their god-likeness very seriously). Not surprisingly, Scorsese has

achieved a formal quality in the film's visuals and editing, resulting in an even blending of concert, studio and rehearsal numbers, interview and off-stage footage. Some of the concert material is intricately detailed; for instance, during Neil Diamond's song, the camera suddenly discovers, then zeroes in tight on Diamond's lips caressing the surface of his microphone.

The film is beautifully photographed, by the likes of Laszlo Kovacs and Vilmos Zsigmond (the credits list them as well as four others as directors of photography, along with eleven first assistant cameramen). The images are steady, including several from a crane—I'm not sure how they ever got one in there in the midst of the swirling mob of an audience, let alone manipulate it. The photography eschews the vérité feel—*the* concert film cliché—which results in a slightly distancing effect, often overpowered by the music, not to mention eyestrain headaches. It is Scorsese's intention to examine, not simulate, a concert experience. The sound recording, utilizing a 24-track Dolby mix, is superb, rivaled only by that of *Renaldo and Clara,* Dylan's recent mammoth self-indulgence.

Surprisingly, Scorsese doesn't come off all that well as an on-camera interviewer. He seems nervous, as if he knows he's at the wrong end of the camera. In one scene, gently photographed at night outside a quiet, rural-like pool hall, a tableful of musicians linger over some beers and talk about the origins of their music, how it all came together. Amongst the group, Scorsese seems puzzled after listening for a while and asks what this new kind of music is called. They look at him in amazement. "Rock and roll," they say. Scorsese mumbles, "Oh, yeah. Of course." In another scene, Robertson leads Scorsese and the camera through a labyrinthine series of hallways and rooms and points out that the building, now used for offices, was once a bordello. Still moving rapidly, after a few seconds of silence, Scorsese numbly observes, "I guess that's why there are a lot of rooms."

Movies Are My Life, a 59-minute documentary on Scorsese made by British director Peter Hayden, perhaps sheds some light on this curious aspect of Scorsese. The film was shot with Scorsese's full cooperation, which probably accounts for Hayden's getting on-camera interviews with most of Scorsese's actors, including the notoriously publicity-shy Robert De Niro. Many of them comment on Scorsese's extreme nervousness while shooting. Jodie Foster says he was especially nervous during *Taxi Driver* (as opposed to *Alice*) since he feared that "there were cops always around the corner ready to arrest him because I was so young." (She also off-handedly mentions his downing pills "for his ulcers.")

This nervousness could also account for his seeming on-camera naiveté. The second of Scorsese's planned one-hour films on various individuals (the first, *ItalianAmerican*, dealt with his parents) was recently shown in New York. *American Boy* is an extrapolated portrait of the sixties through a series of funny but increasingly harrowing stories told by one of his friends, Stephen Prince, described as an actor and producer (he played the jittery junior-businessman-type gun salesman in *Taxi Driver*). In this film, Scorsese occasionally interrupts Prince's rambling to ask him what various drug names and slang mean. (Is it possible, for instance, for anyone as old as Scorsese was during the sixties *not* to know what a "shooting gallery" was?) Watching this film, it occurred to me that Scorsese's odd naiveté on-camera in his documentaries may be merely feigned to overcome the possible ignorance of his eventual movie-theater audience.

The Hayden film, incidentally, which features a long predawn interview with a semidrunken Robbie Robertson, also provides information on the development of *The Last Waltz.* The two men apparently met for the first time at the legendary Woodstock Festival, for the film of which Scorsese was principal editor. When it came time to make *Waltz*, Scorsese "was the only person I knew who knew enough about movies to do it. I didn't know anything about movies, plus he loves the music and grew up with it, so he could relate to the whole fucking experience. The movie was supposed to be simple, a recording of the concert," but as Scorsese got more and more involved in it, "he talked us into doing some additional numbers in the studio and also all the interview stuff. It all just grew out of a very simple idea." Perhaps referring somewhat incoherently to the stylistic effect of music on his films, Robertson, who

THE LAST WALTZ: *Reunion with Bob Dylan (right)*

doesn't use Scorsese's name and addresses him only as "Maestro," says that "the man is a conductor," and describes a shot (apparently the last one in the film) during which he suddenly looked up in surprise to see Scorsese, riding on the camera crane, eyes half closed, "conducting" the music they were playing. Later he mentions that often during the filming of the interview segments, Scorsese would be "on the chair opposite, moving his arms to what I was saying to him. He was 'conducting' our conversation!"

The Last Waltz is the most movie-free of Scorsese's pictures. Still, the opening credits sequence features a formally dressed waltzing pair, which recalls the subway *pas-de-deux* from *New York, New York*. You can't tell from the film, or from Hayden's film, or the Prince short, which deals by implication with the time period, what Scorsese really thinks about the era, whether he regrets the decade and its excesses or accepts its lessons. After all, those years have been kind to him. In and after them, he found success as a movie director, his dream from adolescence. Whether that success also includes wealth is problematical; certainly he hasn't achieved it on the scale of Lucas and Spielberg, the West Coast branch of his generation, who traded each other points on *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, thus becoming millionaires on *each other's* films alone.

In that context of sixties-seventies evaluation, the final sequence of *The Last Waltz* becomes less a conceit than a quietly moving statement. On a small, empty stage, the Band is playing the film's theme song. Beginning with a close-up of the organ pipes, the camera cranes down over them and out until the group is squarely framed. They are suddenly brightly illuminated against a dark green background. (The bright light coldly symbolizes their long-term success, literally, somewhat banally, time in the spotlight?) Then the light is extinguished, and the camera continues to move backward, the group still playing, now dimly lit. The camera moves further and further back, past two long lines of large soft globes of light, at opposite ends of the frame, extending from the stage like a night-time airport runway. Implying a creative permanence, they continue to play, softly.

—DAVID BARTHOLOMEW

Books

HITCH
The Life and Work of Alfred Hitchcock

By John Russell Taylor. London: Faber, 1978. 6.50.

The publisher's blurb on the jacket of this "authorized biography" of Hitchcock claims that it penetrates to "the man behind the mask," but

THE LAST WALTZ: *Reunion with Bob Dylan (right)*

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of course *Hitch* does nothing of the kind. John Russell Taylor is driven to admit that Hitchcock is "the artist disappearing into his art." The mask for all intents and purposes (Russell Taylor's included) has long become the man. The persona has absorbed the person, for the good and simple reason that Hitchcock wanted it to do so. Attempts like this one to cast light on Hitchcock's films by reference to his life are for this reason misplaced and forlorn. They turn into self-consuming artefacts, particularly when these attempts are undertaken, as they are here, at the direct expense of what we really need: sustained visual analysis of what goes on in Hitchcock's *films*. Taylor's attempts to sketch Hitchcock's films, one by one, as "events" in a "life" turn up some fascinating detail, to be sure; but they all run up against the same obstacle, one laboriously constructed by Hitchcock himself. The truth is that Hitchcock's private life (whether or not it can be separated from what Hitchcock says, and says so deliberately, about it) is almost completely uneventful—even if his claim to have been celibate for the last forty years is not without interest.

The main value of Taylor's amiable, well-written but finally self-defeating and bland book is its account of production details and difficulties surrounding Hitchcock's films—not all of this information is easy to come by in other accounts—and as a source of anecdotes. And because the anecdotes are about Hitchcock, they are priceless. "On one occasion in Switzerland recently he surprised his companion in the car by suddenly saying, 'That is the most frightening sight I have ever seen', and pointing to a little boy walking past with a priest who had his hand on his shoulder and was talking very seriously to him. Hitch leaned out of the car and called, 'Run, little boy, run for your life'." Or the proverbially dictatorial Hitchcock on the set: "What would he do, someone once asked him, if in the middle of a long and difficult take a member of the crew sneezed or dropped a hammer? 'I'd say "cut," look in the direction of the man who sneezed, and expect him not to be there.' " And Hitchcock confided to Taylor the idea behind Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman's famous kiss in *Notorious*. "He had an image in his mind of amourous obsession," recounts Taylor, "derived from a scene he had once witnessed when his train stopped for a few minutes at Etaples, just outside Boulogne. He saw a couple standing near a great brick wall embracing while the boy was urinating against the wall. The girl occasionally looked down to see how he was progressing, then looked round, then down again, but never let go of his arm the whole time. Nothing could interrupt romance . . . " Taylor's book is full of such revealing delights and *frissons*, but like other books about Hitchcock it ends up by raising more problems than it solves. And not the least of these problems is a new one: *why* Hitchcock *authorized* this biography and released it into the world with his blessing. —PAUL THOMAS

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The American Gangster Crime Film

By Jack Shadoian. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978.)

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Seidman, Steve. *The Film Career of Billy Wilder.* Pleasantville, N.Y.: Redgrave Publishing Co., 1977. $7.80. Synopses, credits, biographical sketch.

Sennett, Ted. *Masters of Menace: Greenstreet and Lorre.* New York: Dutton, 1979. $8.95. Amusing anecdotes.

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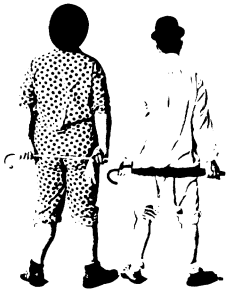

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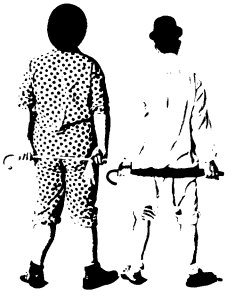

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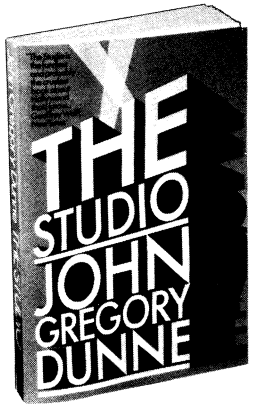

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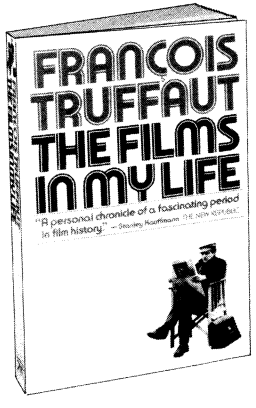

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